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Editors' Introduction: The View from US Cultural Studies Today

by SAJ, Robert F. Carley, Eero Laine, Yumi Pak, Alyson K. Spurgas and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Reflecting on this moment of "crisis"—an inadequate word to capture the scope, the cost, and the history of the present violences—we consider what "building something small" might look like, thinking complexly about the immediacy of people and our needs.

KEYWORDS United States, capitalism, cultural studies, neoliberalism

Many of us in different ways are feeling isolated, afraid, crushed, exhausted, uncertain, and destroyed. Not about the faltering of the US liberal horizon of possibility, but about the really-existing violences of this moment. Such violences are simultaneously threatened and forthcoming, obviously and urgently underway, and devastatingly past—beyond our reach to affect or change. They loom over us yet are already here, the ongoing, incessant, normalized operations of racial capitalism, of ableism and imperialism, and of cis-heteropatriarchy. To say that nothing, somehow, has changed, is not to hold today's lives and deaths less closely to our hearts, but to hold past lives and past deaths just as dearly.

Felt differences from the past and from potential futures reverberate through this moment, even if they are uniquely now and here for us. What are some of those feelings from our position in US cultural studies? We fear, yes, that the US's violences will be turned even more against us and against more of us, in the US

and beyond. Survival feels less certain. Escape feels more seductive. There is an uncanniness in watching those around us shift and adapt, swallow, bow, brace, flee, acquiesce, and try, in ways large and small, to find and imagine a life into the future. There is a new loneliness about particular, unexpected fallings-in-line, the loss of those we thought were comrade, family, ride-or-die. There is the way the mind and heart and body and hope breaks, again and again, while continuing to go about our days investing time, money, and energy into infrastructures that no longer feel sturdy: the university, the internet search engine, the supply chain, the rule of law, the behavior of corporate and state bureaucracies, the dollar. There is the new heart-crush that comes with every emergency that is made mundane. These experiences are amplified by the desperation of news media, where ideology is pushed to a representational crisis: how to sell the myth of the liberal horizon when the liberal horizon is crumbling?

There is, too, a pleasure in the dissolution of this, perhaps the most powerful myth of neoliberalism: that racial capitalism has a future in which we can make it better. But this is not an easy humor, and we know all too clearly that it is always able bodies and cis-male bodies and white resourced bodies who win in the fight to be the "last man standing." We want and need and *demand* a future that is trans and queer people's and women's and crips' and Black people's and Indigenous people's and working people's, the world over. So even as we see the potential for change in this period, we are eager, desperate for a fundamentally intersectional understanding to be the shared thread held by most of the one million different ways of building differently that will make up anything after: hope-full.

To be clear, hope is not a prominent feeling of the moment. We're talking hope as a discipline, a practice. We're talking the quote much attributed to Angela Davis: "You have to act as though it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." Mariame Kaba draws attention to the everyday practice of hope as a way to "live in the world and be of the world,"[1] and we are indeed striving to live in and be of and be with *this* world. An essential factor for

Kaba is an understanding of the smallness of ourselves, our lives as "a fraction of the living that's going to be done by the universe and that has already been done by the universe."[2] This kind of practice of hope is built on a radically capacious imaginary for resisting alienation by understanding the power and significance of others. This capaciousness lies underneath small interventions, where our power still lies, even in moments like this when everything is so urgent that it is hard to feel like anything is enough.

And it's *not* enough. How could anything that is not food in the bellies of the starving be enough? It's not enough, but also we can't do without it. Attention to the present feels crisis-shaped, but "crisis" is also an inadequate word to capture the scope, the cost, and the history. The experience of this crisis as new, partial, or temporary is not universally shared. The ground is beyond uneven—stable ground for building on, of course, is a myth of US racial capitalism and settler colonialism—which makes it feel difficult to grasp action, power, and change. When it feels that there is *nothing* to hold on to, what might be left to grasp *is* the small and the unsteady and the in-process. After all, what are we to each other?

For the many of us who have not yet begun, what does this intimacy, this "building something small," actually look like? It may feel acutely absurd and disconnecting to, for example, organize for our retirement funds to disinvest from Israeli militarization when we are witnessing the state- and economy-sanctioned violence of genocide and war. To make sandwiches for our unhoused neighbors while their former homes sit empty, awaiting a higher bidder. Yet organizing in such concerted, small ways keeps our minds, bodies, and hearts limber so that we do not sink into the momentum of blinking acceptance that is so amenable to racial capitalism's status quo.

Further, writing a letter with your colleagues—say, demanding that your workplace resist fascism's spread in key, specific ways[3]—builds connections, even with just one or two people in your community, laying foundations of Real Human Sociality

should all other or more preferred means of communication and connection collapse. Building small can look so many different ways, thinking complexly about the immediacy of people and our needs. In the face of the power outages and movement blockades after Hurricane Sandy, neighbors shared batteries and clock radios, and able-bodied people from around the neighborhood formed an informal collective to carry drinking water up the dozens of flights of stairs to elders in Chinatown highrises. For many, the only existing connection they had previously was knowing or *hearing* that their neighbors existed, were there, were human, were alive. It's very likely that you will not love these neighbors in the same way as your trusted friends, but this is how sociality still works, even outside of the frame of the media we have designed for it. Growing small connections anyway. Being present with others. Playing by the light of the streetlamp in the public space between your dwellings, one of you bringing a folding table, and another the deck of cards.

This is the milieu: the vital need to hold capacious, enormous, revolutionary hope, so that we can work hard to build on volatile ground something microscopic and demanding and impossible and ephemeral. What more can cultural studies offer? We are holding out the bare threads of what we know, an offering to all the building and the seed-planting of this moment.

A thread: Racism, ableism, and cis-heterosexism *constitute* capitalism and imperialism, and are pieces and sometimes the whole of what makes labor and economic relations, and vice-versa. They are not interchangeable, but structures of power exist via humans and our interactions. When we look at a bomb and what it does, we can say that it is ableism, and many of the same things about it that are ableism are things about it that are capitalism: what it does as an object but also who makes it, where it exists and when and in whose hands or bodies, who has the power to use it compared to who is subjected to it, how the bomb's authority has effects in the world, what could have been done instead with the materials and time that made it, and so forth. And in the same way, the bomb is

racism and the same thing about it that is racism is sexism, is ableism, is imperialism, is capitalism. These are base, not superstructure, issues.

Another: Representation, in itself, is not matter. Its capacity to matter, to make material, mostly happens in the sphere of representation industries themselves. It is not only money that is material but bodies (and their lives) themselves. That disabled people matter, that colonized people matter, that people of color matter, that women matter and trans people matter. That you, reader, whatever your position or identity, matter, that your body and life is material in the world, and that what you do with it matters. And that matter amplifies in your relations with others, in the way that you constellate a group, not an abstract "identity" group, but a specific group of specific people in relation to one another, making and doing and changing together, for however long it may be.

And finally: Despite the lies and myths of capitalism, building at the scale of the interpersonal may also be the only possible way of building social change.

We have no answers, but these are some offerings from the intellectual predecessors of *Lateral*'s kind of cultural studies—the Combahee River Collective and INCITE! as much as Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall. Movements do not happen just because everyone seems to find the exact right single thing to do so that we only have to spend our time and energy *once*. Living in any future that is different is more than one march, one vigil, or one policy change. The social and symbolic significance of an "action" becoming "a movement" might come when the energies and people from one small activity meet up with the energies and people working on another issue, and are joined by the energies and people holding a protest march, and though they mix and change and shift and flow they decide to meet more regularly and do something else, and some of them splinter off but they're all in the streets together facing down the next ICE raid, singing and advancing and holding each other to safeguard what we had, until that moment, collectively built.

Inside This Issue

Lorise Diamond's "Baldwin's Balls: Sensuality, Profanity, and the Testicular Fortitude to Reckon with Race," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/baldwins-balls-sensuality-profanity-testicular-fortitude-race-diamond/> explores racialized disgust and erotic resistance in James Baldwin's essays, novels, and short stories. The erotic functions as "a site of both exposure and dependency," a place where the body—the sensuality defined by and exceeding its biological manifestation, its balls—and its wanting cannot be silenced. Diamond reads Baldwin as utilizing profanity to illuminate these risks of intimacy, while simultaneously offering a politics of sensuality as "critique and corrective to racial alienation."

In "Futurist Forensics: Indigenous Evidence, Cosmo-Epistemologies, and the New Red Order," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/futurist-forensics-indigenous-evidence-cosmo-epistemologies-new-red-order-smith/> Patrick Brian Smith subverts contemporary practices of "media forensics," grounded in state-sanctioned forms of power, surveillance, and control, by drawing on Indigenous epistemologies and decolonial thought. Through an analysis of the Indigenous media collective the New Red Order, which center Indigenous epistemological agency and challenge Western hegemonic practices. Smith advocates for a media forensics that includes diverse publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices, grounded in subversive, decolonial forms of evidentiary practice.

In "Practical Strategies of Disruption for Dismantling White Supremacy in Ontario's Education System," < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/practical-strategies-disruption-dismantling-white-supremacy-ontario-education-system-al-thayabeh/> Aida Al-Thayabeh thinks through stories from students and their communities as well as a critical history of the Canadian education system to suggest practicable alternatives to the colonial education. Taking up how educators think about students of color across multiple facets of schooling, Al-Thayabeh explains and counters problematic aspects ranging from curriculum to

classroom management, assessment, and the definition of “success” itself. At the core of this piece is a methodology shaped by a commitment to solidarity: Al-Thayabeh offers a generous challenge to white and settler educators to get uncomfortable.

In “Surviving in Eugenic Times: Disabled Artists’ Feelings about Their ‘Under-the-Table’ Livelihoods,” < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/surviving-in-eugenic-times-disabled-artists-feelings-about-their-under-the-table-livelihoods-collins-jones-rice/> Kimberlee Collins, Chelsea Temple Jones and Carla Rice argue that “in Canada, the lived experiences of disabled people are also death experiences.” Their research project, entitled “Artistry Under the Table: D/deaf and Disabled Artists’ Livelihoods,” brings together disability studies and a sustainable livelihoods framework as they conduct interviews with cultural producers in the Deaf, crip and mad arts movement in Canada. Rather than turning to the less nuanced argument that art is resistance, Collins, Jones and Rice examine how studies of the development of the Global South may be applicable around neoliberal capitalism in the Global North, not to promote a false one-on-one equivalency, but to ask us to consider how ableism is predicated upon measures that are linked to the entwined trajectories of the Global North and South: “eugenics, anti-Black racism, misogyny, settler colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.” This is particularly critical when thinking of the necropolitical economy in Canada, and how it promotes newgenics: rather than eugenics being a discourse of the past, the authors contend, we see it emerge continuously in the propelling of Deaf, crip and mad artists toward Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). Focusing on interview participants’ comments on disposability, dignity and art as resistance, Collins, Jones and Rice challenge this forward momentum toward MAiD that is couched in the liberal discourse of rights and accommodation.

In “Subjunctive Grief: Affective Methodologies for Articulating Futures,” < https://csalateral.org/issue/14-1/subjunctive-grief-affective-methodologies-

articulating-futures-wolf-meyer/> Matthew Wolf-Meyer offers a liberatory vision for mourning, considering how not just thinking about but *feeling* future loss might give us more space for and access to change in the present. Wolf-Meyer focuses on two cases: medical aid in dying and parenting children with childhood psychosis in order to imagine how *subjunctive grief* allows for a kind of staying present with loss (and what that loss may bring) that pushes against normative or stage-based models of grieving—linear models wherein "getting better" is expected and the onus of "moving on" is wholly placed on the individual. Bringing future loss into the present and engaging it affectively allows for a radical and revolutionary speculation about what life might be like in spite of and because of its pain, disruption, and messiness, including for people with terminal illnesses or those who are debilitated—by capitalism, by the state, by white supremacy, and also by cancer and psychosis—and for those who love and are in community with them. Grief in the subjunctive (the "if only things were or could be") affords a new realm of possibility for illness, death, and loss, and Wolf-Meyer's analyses and reflections thus add to theorizations of ways of being currently imagined within critical disability studies and Mad studies, in addition to anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-eugenicist frameworks for biopolitics and affect theory: "subjunctive grief allows for the possibility of working through affective attachments to a changing world, making way for a new collective reality that, if it is not just, inclusive, and equitable, is at least more just, more inclusive, and more equitable."

This issue also features a robust number of contributions to the Aporias section. Edited by Joshua Falek, the section examines key ideas in cultural studies from the vantage of emerging activists and scholars, who are entering into long standing conversations and redefining our work into the future. In this issue, Renata Prati asks, "What Should We Do with Our Depressions? Feelings, Biology, Politics." < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/what-should-we-do-with-our-depressions-feelings-biology-politics-prati/> Prati turns to the Prozac wars—back towards the 1990s, then forward to today—to understand the elisions shaping

present theoretical conversations about feelings, responsibility, and mental health. Any binarization of biology and politics is made patently false when considering agency and mental health, and Prati both critiques the limits shaping this polarization and urges towards a new understanding in the gap. Emma Kaufman engages discourses of antisemitism < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/the-spectre-of-antisemitism/> through "a tension that lies at the core of anti-Zionist Jewish discourse." The article takes up recent developments and established lines of thought across various sites from history as well as courts of justice and the university. Her work thus offers a meditation and mediation of the ways that antisemitism haunts contemporary discourse. Alejandro Beas Murillo examines marronage < https://csalateral.org/section/aporias/marronage-and-its-aporias-beas-murillo/> and the discursive implications of the figure of the maroon on Caribbean thought. The work intertwines historical readings and contemporary thought on masculinity and Blackness, mothers and heteropatriarchy. It offers readers both a clear approach to the history of marronage and encourages deeper thought on what complicated and troubled figures might do in the present, how they might inform and question our own academic and political investments.

Finally, this issue includes two new episodes from the *Positions* podcast, produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter. The first episode of Season 2, co-hosted by Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Globalization and Culture Working Group Co-Host Kathalene Razzano, discusses *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/chimerica-disorienting-politics/> (University of Michigan Press, 2024) with author Fan Yang, along with writer and historian Mark Tseng-Putterman; a scholarly commentary by Marcus Breen follows. The second episode, co-hosted by Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's New Media and Digital Cultures Working Group Co-Host Reed Van Schenck, discusses AI literacy < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/ai-literacy-and-the-changing-digital-political-landscape-losh-raley-phillips-van-

schenck-milan/> , digital politics, and the 2024 US presidential election with authors Elizabeth Losh (William and Mary) and Rita Raley (UC Santa Barbara) and is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Stefania Milan.

Notes

1. Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Haymarket, 2021), 27. ↩
2. Ibid. ↩
3. The Professors of Stockton University, "Silence is Collaboration: Academics Must Speak Out Against Fascism An Open Letter From South Jersey," *Literary Hub* (April 2, 2025), https://lithub.com/silence-is-collaboration-academics-must-speak-out-against-fascism < https://lithub.com/silence-is-collaboration-academics-must-speak-out-against-fascism> . ↩

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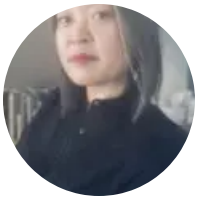

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Baldwin's Balls: Sensuality, Profanity, and the Testicular Fortitude to Reckon with Race

by Lorise A. Diamond | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Both sensuality and profanity dwell within love's truthful self-expression. James Baldwin's oeuvre reads race relations in the United States, revealing a skewed balance between sensuality and profanity rectified through authentic sensual connections across racial lines. This essay introduces Baldwin's work as an exemplar of world reading, an ingredient of cultural literacy, to argue that sensuality prevents society from dismissing negative emotions as merely symptomatic of race or class resentment. Centering on profanity, the argument relies on how Baldwin deftly constructs sensuality as an inversive emotional balm for healing the US race problem through the feminine energeia found in his pervasive testicular discourse.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, Black studies, James Baldwin, cultural studies, gender, rhetoric

> "Music don't begin like a song," he said. "Forget all that bullshit you hear. Music can get to be a song, but it starts with a cry. That's all. It might be the cry of a newborn baby, or the sound of a hog being slaughtered, or a man when they put the knife to his balls. And that sound is everywhere. People spend their whole lives trying to drown out that sound."
>
> –James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*[1]

The United States has a race problem. At the dawn of the twentieth century, artists of the New Negro movement faced a challenging dual responsibility: to captivate white audiences without reinforcing racial clichés, and to assert Black American identity and life experiences without inciting racial tensions. While some

Black artists aligned their work to predominant expectations set largely by white patrons that narrative content center on themes such as “racial uplift,” “respectable” Blackness, or exoticized Black culture while avoiding more radical critiques of racism or depictions of Black life deemed “too raw” for white audiences, other artists tackled the issue of race by delving into its broader social aspects and highlighting its far-reaching implications.[2] James Baldwin’s oeuvre advances and extends those latter aims.

Baldwin constructs sensuality as life force: an innate eroticism driving profound connection, presence, and joy. Nevertheless, this same sensuality appears dually as constantly challenged and disrupted by profanity, expressed not merely in vulgar language, but as an embodied rejection of connection, an aggressive refusal against racial reconciliation. Baldwin engages profanity paradoxically; while it alienates and separates, it simultaneously serves as a powerful call to consciousness, insistently demanding recognition: “Hear me!” “Love me!” This dialectical interplay reveals profanity as both wound and remedy, simultaneously articulating alienation and longing, disgust and desire, fragmentation and reunion. Drawing from Audre Lorde’s concept of erotic power, I argue that Baldwin’s dialectic offers more than an opportunity for textual analysis: it provides an exemplar of the literacies of sensuality and profanity, embodied pedagogies built from emotional truths. These literacies unsettle the ideological structures sustaining racial alienation and ground sensuality as critical praxis toward meaningful racial solidarity and reconciliation.

On sensuality, in autobiographical style, Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* contends, “To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”[3] He positions sensuality as an animating force, resonating with Lorde’s notion of the erotic as vital, creative energy. Yet Baldwin’s work simultaneously demonstrates how machinations of profanity disrupt and heighten erotic desire, pointing to a persistent dialectical tension. Profanity, in this sense, becomes a

complex mechanism: it may thwart and alienate Baldwin and his characters from sensuality, while also marking points of intense longing and genuine connection.

Sensuality knows no bounds; its limitless scope harbors contradictions and ambiguities, manifesting pleasure alongside tensions that reflect the intricate ironies of human connection. Profanity emerges as sensuality's counterforce and complement, sometimes antagonist, sometimes accomplice. Baldwin strategically deploys profanity to voice unresolved tensions and intense alienations that sensuality alone cannot address. His profanity at times represents unjust US American social and political systems; at other moments it interrupts complacency through active resistance. Nonetheless, profanity provokes urgent recognition across racial divides through raw, unfiltered confrontations and challenges to systemic injustices. Profanity may serve as a mechanism, a key, unlocking the door to sensuality.

Thus, sensuality carries confounding contradictions and ambiguities aimed at pleasure and satisfaction, pointing to perplexing ironies that illuminate critical provocations in Baldwin's work. These provocations confront and extend racial discourse while also addressing personal and intimate dimensions of human experience. Within his oeuvre dwells the sensual, the erotic, the profane, the abject, profanity at times alluding to the racially unjust outcomes of hegemonic white supremacy embedded within US American social relations (the opposite of the sensual), while at other times the profane connotes embrace, connection, and dignity (embodied in the sensual). Baldwin mobilizes ironies between sensuality and profanity, deploying sensuality as critique and corrective to racial alienation. Through its dialectical relationship with the profane, sensuality exposes the paradoxes of race relations: it points to and challenges the oppressive, unsustainable alienation enforced by racial divides, beckoning society toward refusal, pleasure, and ultimately, reconnection.

While critics such as Clarence Hardy and Christopher Hunt have found that Baldwin's treatment of the Black penis and testicles may reflect a problematic sexism, few specifically interrogate how Baldwin's rhetorical use of profanity shapes and sustains a dialectical tension between sensuality and racial alienation that advocates racial reckoning. Thus, this article's analysis draws from work by Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Lorde to illuminate those tensions, and from Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings" and Julia Kristeva's "abjections" to identify Baldwin's strategic deployment of profanity as more than disruptive or confrontational. It awakens audiences' desires, compelling readers to reckon with racialized identity, embodied ideologies, and social separation, stark realities rooted in the Black-white binary. Baldwin mobilizes profanity as critique and corrective, inviting collective efforts toward evolved self-awareness, authentic connection, and a heightened sense of community. Situating Baldwin's oeuvre within my broader project of Evolutionary Queer Literacy (EQL)—world reading, world traveling, world making pedagogical literacies—I contend that Baldwin's dialectic between profanity and sensuality provides a revolutionary framework for beginning to build community across racial divides. This paper thus aims to center "bonds of affection," echoing Abraham Lincoln's inaugural invocation, as aspirations central to Baldwin's narratives and urgently needed to strengthen national security and democracy by promoting and cultivating strong ties across differences in identity, social realities, and cultures.

Profanity and Sensuality: A World Reading Praxis

Positioning myself as the human lens—a Congolese, Guinean, Scots Irish, and Monacan Tribe descendant, Queer Black American cultural ecologist inhabiting a female body—I approach life as a very variegated adventure of testing to confirm or disconfirm social, economic, political, and cultural myths. Summarily, I

approach Baldwin's work through the lens of EQL. EQL, informed by a transdisciplinary frame that features critical pedagogy, Black and transnational feminism, and queer humanism, understanding cultural literacy as embodied and relational acts of "reading the world" (Freire),[4] world traveling (Maria Lugones),[5] and world making (Octavia Butler, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Ruha Benjamin)[6] critical literacies, where interoception, situated knowledge, situational awareness, and mutuality intersect, challenging dominant ideologies to engender positive cultural connections. Baldwin's work exemplifies critical cultural literacy enacted through bodies that navigate and narrate social boundaries, embodying and deploying myriad literacies beyond textuality, negotiating complex racial and gendered landscapes through visceral emotional truths.

Employing a triangular analytic prism, this analysis reinterprets Baldwin's sensuality and profanity through critical literacies of world reading, world traveling, and world making. Audre Lorde's concept of "the erotic" anchors the interpretive framework, conceptualizing sensuality as a transformative, embodied literacy rooted in affective and spiritual realms. In this sense, Lorde's eroticism provides a lens through which Baldwin's sensuality may be seen as a radical form of world reading, perceiving beneath oppressive surface realities to connect intimately with deeper truths of human experience. Conversely, Sianne Ngai's theorization of "ugly feelings" and Julia Kristeva's notion of "abjection" inform my approach to profanity, situating it as a literacy of profound emotional and social dislocation. Profanity, thus framed, becomes a language of world traveling, a disruptive articulation of alienation and racialized marginality. These affective vocabularies capture the tensions and ambivalences of navigating hostile sociocultural terrains.

Additionally, insights from Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Sam Keen enrich this dialectical interplay, pointing to how erotic desire, intimacy, and communal bonds intersect with racialized disgust and alienation as Baldwin and his characters travel across and through worlds. Collectively, these perspectives

elucidate Baldwin's deliberate juxtaposition of sensuality and profanity as inversely related yet mutually constitutive cultural literacies. Sensuality emerges as an embodied literacy and erotic intervention against racialized estrangement, functioning as an intimate act of world making. Profanity, also an embodied literacy, simultaneously conveys authentic intimacy and interrupts feigned intimacy, animating tensions that engender critique and reconciliation.

Testicular Fortitude

In her sociopoetic essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde avers,

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plain, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant the suppression of the erotic as they considered source of power and information within our lives."[7]

The erotic exists as an innate reservoir within us, occupying a feminine and spiritual dimension anchored in our unrealized and often suppressed emotions. To sustain itself, oppression systematically contaminates or misrepresents these innate reserves, sources from which life-affirming energy flows. For women, dare I say for people, this distortion translates into the silencing and devaluation of erotic power as an essential channel of insight and empowerment.

Testicles and ovaries begin their journey as one, embryologically indistinct yet potent with the promise of becoming. Governed by genetic codes and hormonal commands, this primordial tissue transforms, manifesting externally as testicles or internally as ovaries, both organs intertwined with the powerful capacity to generate life, charged with sensuality and vulnerability alike. The descent of

testicles outside the body, their exposure and vulnerability, symbolizes the courage inherent in visibility, risk-taking, and openness, traits Baldwin metaphorically invokes as necessary for confronting uncomfortable truths about race and identity.

This transformation from undifferentiated gonads, potentially female, to testicles, a journey from internal safety to external exposure, parallels Baldwin's narrative use of "balls" as markers of courage and resilience. Whether US Americans decide to enact "testicular fortitude"—the audacity to expose ourselves to risk, discomfort, and vulnerability—we must begin to embrace the nakedness and honesty required for significant racial reckoning.

Much like Lorde's concept of erotic power emerges from suppressed feelings that oppression seeks to distort, so too does testicular fortitude represent a reclamation and resurgence of an erotic, life-sustaining energy previously constrained by oppressive norms around masculinity. Erotic power, therefore, is not solely confined to the feminine domain Lorde articulates but extends metaphorically into the masculine realm, with testicular fortitude embodying an audacious embrace of vulnerability, sensuality, and strength as essential forces for social transformation and personal empowerment. As Baldwin's work reminds readers, true resilience and fortitude lie not in armor or concealment but in willingly descending into vulnerability, risking exposure, and confronting the profound truths of social intimacy, sensuality, and communal creation.

In "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American" Baldwin asserts, "In Europe, a Black writer can drop the façade of regularity and be themselves," suggesting that Black folks in the US endure the disquieting elusiveness of truth—true self-awareness, self-expression, and self-determination—a disconnection from erotic power.[8] Lorde suggests that power manifests in numerous forms, "used and unused," recognized and unnoticed, nudging us to tap into primal energies embodied in the erotic, sensual, loving power too often suppressed.[9] In *The*

Passionate Life, Keen centers a "nonreproductive ordering" (Holland 59–60) of relationships, which points to love and intimacy as embodied truth known and measured by feeling within the private, unobservable, intimate spaces of platonic relations.[10] The presence and depth of genuine relationships bound across racial lines, reproductive and nonreproductive, anchored in sensuality functions as a barometer that measures the shifting pressures and intensities in human emotions and connections. For Baldwin, the seat of truth, sensual connection with self and others exists s within the testicles, rooted in Lorde's feminine agency of sensuality.

The tendency to sexualize Black physicality, a tendency which maintains racial segregation and inequality, may be understood as encounters with the erotic distorted into racialized disgust. Ngai offers an "aesthetics of negative emotions" from which to interpret Baldwin's "very effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together—a task whose urgency seems to increase in proportion to its difficulty in an increasingly anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society—[as] a prime occasion for ugly feelings."[11] Baldwin explores the self-alienation of racial strife and segregation as profane, illustrated through characters that feel impotent or dysgenic particularly considering our inequitable US democracy. Ugly feelings include anxiety, fear, and disgust: sensuality's emotional antithesis, carefully crafted throughout Baldwin's work.

Connected to Lorde and Keen's nods toward sensuality, Reid-Pharr's "Alas Poor Jimmy," in *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*, critically examines Baldwin's final novel *Just Above My Head*. Pharr suggests that in works such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, and essays like "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin illumes how struggles, victories, and defeats within any community reflect the broader challenges that individuals encounter in their quest for "community, intimacy, and love."[12] Pharr summarizes Baldwin's work, contending, "Erotic choice often operates, in fact, as a means to reposition oneself in society," reminding readers

“of Baldwin’s tortured character, David, in *Giovanni’s Room* as he struggles with the erotic and social implications of choosing either ‘the white woman,’ Hella, or ‘the colored man,’ Giovanni.”[13] The opportunity to shift and renegotiate social positionality and ugly feelings becomes possible through our erotic choices.

One example of renegotiating ugly feelings associated with social positionality presents in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” which connects sentimentalism, preferred by the Black literary community of Baldwin’s time,[14]

> He began to feel a joy he had never felt before. He watched the hanging, gleaming body, the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then. . . . The man with the knife took the privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling as though he were weighing them. And the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and a huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched then, cradled them, caressed them. . . . Then Jesse screamed, and the crowd screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came running down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing.[15]

The passage above depicts Jesse’s first encounter with lynching and his visceral response. The white man’s hand (a participant) is described as “cradling” the Black man’s genitals, centering the sexual violence and dehumanization involved in the act. Baldwin’s narrative hints at adult Jesse’s sense of guilt, expressed as his trepidation throughout the narrative, which takes readers recursively through Jesse’s adult life and childhood. Baldwin’s world-travelling technique gives readers a sense of Jesse’s ideological interpellation from an innocent white boy who played with a Black friend in childhood into a white supremacist, socially sanctioned to inflict racialized brutality. Jesse’s white supremacist interpellation prevents him from maintaining a friendship with his Black friend.

Relatedly, Keen contends that the erotic recognizes love as a central premise for truly understanding human existence. We must base philosophical debates on love, arguing from a place already grounded in love.[16] Developing this idea further, he connects the human psyche, as a portal through which existential truths emerge, to our self-awareness as beings driven by the desire to love and connect.[17] To exemplify his loving stance, Keen invokes childhood experiences of eros: "A child may be more loving, more motivated by eros, more open than an adult. Our journey may be a matter of finding ways to return to what we once knew and have forgotten. In the platonic addition, eros is a remembering, or recollection, of the self, and effort (as Zen also says) to discover the face we had before we were born."[18] A child's natural state involves a greater sense of eros-motivated love; children embody sensuality's most unguarded and receptive form. Adults, Keen implies, suffer from an amnesia that often causes them to lose the connection between intuition and sensual openness.

Jesse supplants childhood guilt with racialized disgust. Sianne Ngai constructs disgust as an emotion that simultaneously encompasses and assaults the contrast between itself and desire, which obliterates "aesthetic satisfaction" and the "disinterestedness" upon which this satisfaction relies.[19] Disgust alters how we perceive and engage with art, beauty, and emotionally charged experiences. Ngai suggests that literary and cultural theorists ignore analyzing disgust in favor of desire. A reason for the imbalanced focus on desire and disgust might involve the political right's historical tendency to overtly use disgust to strengthen divisions between the self and those viewed as "contaminating" others, thereby perpetuating racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny.[20]

An example of racialized disgust propels the fictional narrative in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin's narrator, Tish, describes Daniel's telling of his experience in a paddy wagon with a drunken white man who "vomited all over himself," stinking, and singing. Daniel's anecdote highlights how Baldwin connects emotional excitement to the groin region: "But the mothers who put him in this wagon, man,

they was coming in their pants while they did it. I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard without he hear some nigger moan."[21] While Daniel feels repulsed by the drunken white man's noisome noisiness, his repulsion, aimed at the man, lacks the harmful ire inscribed in disgust. Regarding the white drunkard, Daniel's tone more closely resembles pity until it turns to racialized disgust as his attention moves from the drunkard to the police, the white men in charge. His disgust then indicts white American men, their impotency, perversion, and social indifference toward Black men.

Daniel confronts an erotic choice. Erotic choice comprises a tenet of queer theory. Blending critical race theory and queer theory in *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Holland confronts queer sensuality as an erotic choice, aligning well with Pharr's position that Baldwin's work points to how community victories and defeats mirror individual challenges encountered in the quest for "community, intimacy, and love." Holland's stance also connects with Lorde's and Keen's thoughts on the erotic as integral to human sensuality. Holland considers the erotic and the challenges inhered in forming true community to critique the human capacity to forge genuine connections. The erotic, in Holland's view, exposes the limitations of interpersonal relationships and underscores subjectivity and its interdependent nature. She suggests that subjecthood or possessing a sense of self is less about an autonomous self-conception based on individual actions and more about our relationships with others, implying that our very humanity intertwines with and exists defined by relational connections.[22] Baldwin's character Daniel exemplifies this relational conception of subjecthood in his interactions with the drunkard and the police, juxtaposing sensuality—manifested as "stinking and singing"—against the profanity and racial disgust characterized by the officers "coming in their pants while they did it." Daniel's experience embodies Baldwin's inversive technique, while demonstrating Holland's concept that we perceive, define, and enact our humanity through our relationships with others, sensual and profane.

Profanity has a place in resistance. Baldwin's language, "I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard without he hear some nigger moan," may be interpreted as a curse, a curse of resistance able to momentarily invert the usual power dynamics, allowing oppressed people to voice frustration, pain, anger, and or defiance against the oppressor. The white phallus connotes sexual violence and oppression in decolonial contexts, which points to white dominance parasitizing Black life to affirm itself. Thus, the line reveals the erotic as a site of both exposure and dependency, where vulnerability cannot be contained, inverting the racial-sexual power dynamic, to suggest that white male arousal, symbolically, their claim to virility and dominance exists not independently but dependent on Black suffering. Moreover, the "moan" becomes a sonic trigger, erotic and violent, pointing to white identity and sexual power as contingent upon Black degradation. Baldwin symbolizes the physical and sexual abuse commonly used by colonizers and slave owners to oppress Black people. This moment of profane refusal, a linguistic curse that unmasks the underlying sickness of a society structured by white supremacy, strips away euphemism and politeness; it forces confrontation. Profanity also challenges taboos and authority, while cultivating a collective identity that constitutes solidarity. It may serve as a galvanizing rally cry, articulate terms for justice, or conversely, imagine plans for revenge.

This moment functions as a pedagogy. It demands a literacy able to hold contradiction, the white man's erection is not about love or joy, but violence disguised as desire, sadistic pleasure born from domination. Baldwin shows us how the erotic becomes a battleground. In Daniel's case, profanity stands as subject resistance impelled by frustration and anger tinged with racialized disgust. The "moan" stands in for everything Baldwin names as erotic and profane: a sound that refuses to be assimilated, a voice that must be heard, a shared human vulnerability that neither power nor denial can silence.

In this resistance, racialized disgust runs both Black and white, sensual and profane. For instance, in *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin condemns white America through a letter to his nephew, writing, "This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish."[23] The idea that white identity, and the sense of security it seems to endow those who wear its skin, lives rooted in the degradation and suffering of others, in this case, people who wear darker brown skins, harkens back to the notion that the racialized disgust experienced by white Americans requires the exclusion, denigration, and death of Black Americans, which undoubtedly fuels Baldwin's disgust and struggle against white hegemony.

Keen's notion of love obviates the need for resistance. His love aligns with the notion of the erotic as a deeply felt and fundamentally life-affirming force. Keen suggests that "healing" constitutes love's primary purpose, driven by a call to recognize ourselves and our touchpoints: "To love is to be about the task of healing. The lover's vocation is to lure others (and that part of the self that nurses old injuries and fears, takes pride in autonomy, and harbors the illusion of self-sufficiency) into recognition of their true being and their true allegiance. It is to practice the art of forgiveness and to expand the circle of care. Love's way is always vulnerable because it abandons the rules of power-politics and the paranoid game upon which the social consensus is based."[24] This notion links with Lorde's thought on the erotic's power to reveal our most genuine and deeply rooted capacities for feeling and action. In this context, love—and by extension, the erotic—becomes a life-transforming force able to challenge social and political norms that underpin resistance to building shared community.

Connectedly, Baldwin and a few of his characters embody Keen's healing type of love secreted within their profanity. Invoking testicular fortitude, the fictive Leo Proudhammer, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, seethes racialized disgust. Leo responds to the degradation inflicted on his brother Caleb while unjustly imprisoned and brutalized by white correction officers:

> Never. Never. Never. I would find some way to make them pay. I would do something one day to at least one bland, stupid, happy white face which would change that face forever. If they thought that Caleb was black, and if they thought that I was black, I would show them, yes, I would, one day, exactly what blackness was! I swore it. I swore it. I whispered it to Caleb's kinky hair. I cursed God from the bottom of my heart, the very bottom of my balls.[25]

Leo expresses a desire to retaliate or seek vengeance and a desire for transformation. His racialized disgust toward white men, law enforcement officers particularly, embedded in traditional power dynamics he recognizes but feels powerless to change, encapsulates frustration, anger, and determination born from racism's dehumanizing results.

Consider this: Keen explicates eros in "The Erotic Crisis," offering insights into the term's Greek etymology, focused on its foundational role in human and natural realms. Keen shares that Greek philosophers regarded eros as the "prime mover," an elemental force driving all entities toward their ultimate fulfillment. This impulse extends human desires into the natural world, illustrating, for instance, how an acorn driven by eros transforms into an oak. A universal striving underscores eros as integral to realizing the inherent potential within all life forms, reflecting a deep connection between eros and the latent power present in nature.[26]

In Leo, Baldwin's erotic impulse arises with a curse from Leo's deepest, most primal self, "the very bottom of my balls," which suggests he draws from an emotional and physical depth, a place associated with strength, virility, and core identity. The curse speaks to the interplay between desire, fear, and revulsion that characterizes white Americans' perception of Blackness and Black masculinity, with the "balls" serving as a symbol of what is alternatively desired and feared, yet kept at a distance, segregated and unaccepted, both white and Black kept from ultimate fulfillment.

The racial separation evoked by disgust—contempt, repulsion, exclusion, denigration—connects to Kristeva's ruminations on the abject. Abjectness suggests that "there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion."[27] Outside nature's embrace, some souls wander outside desire, outside the sensual, drawn toward and drowning in materialistic depths.

For Baldwin's characters, abjectness emerges as a visceral response to guilt and disgust-driven denigration. For example, in *Beale Street*, the narrator's father, Joseph, falls into an abjectness that distances him from white men and pulls him away from his family and social circle. Trying to rouse a despondent Frank from capitalist despair, Joseph empathizes,

> That white man, baby, and may his balls shrivel and his asshole rot, he want you to be worried about the money. That's his whole game. But if we got to where we are without money, we can get further. I ain't worried about their money—they ain't got no right to it anyhow, they stole it from us—they ain't never met nobody they didn't lie to and steal from.[28]

Frank feels an abjectness that eventually ends his life, while Joseph responds from a well of empathy linked to emotional connection: testicles. Frank's despondence about money (and more) "looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable."[29] Joseph's counsel, however, leans more toward the human connection inhered in sensuality because abjection "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced."[30] Joseph's dignified self-reliance, antithetical to abjectness, invokes sensual energy.

In the passage above, Baldwin triggers Joseph's memory through a form of anamnesis, as Keen explains, a "remembering" or recollection of the self's original state. This Platonic philosophy parallels Zen teachings about rediscovering one's

“original face” before birth, symbolizing a return to an intrinsic, unconditioned state. These perspectives suggest that true sensuality and self-understanding lie in recovering what is already known to the soul yet obscured by adult life.

Joseph invokes the imagery of “balls” as an embodied act of remembrance, grounding himself in the eternal sensual energy held within his own body to counter Frank’s overwhelming abjectness. Though Frank was not the most likable man, his visible emotional crisis stirs a bodily recognition in Joseph, an impulse to lift a brother up, compelling a response rooted in sensuality. The pointed curse —“may his balls shrivel and his asshole rot”—signal intense anger and a yearning for retribution, representing a vocal resistance against injustice and exploitation. Directly targeting the oppressor’s body, the curse symbolically reclaims a measure of agency and power in a context where the Black male character experiences economic marginalization and emasculation.

Although Black masculinity has been historically fetishized and demonized, invoking “balls” may represent the reclamation or remembering of one’s core identity, one’s sensuality, as transition from vulnerability to strength or defiance. I revisit *Beale Street* to observe Black artist, husband and perpetually jailed Fonny as he reconciles with his chosen vocation. Conversing with his pregnant wife Tish, Fonny explains: “Now. I’m an artisan. . . . Like a cat who makes—tables. I don’t like the word artist. Maybe I never did. I sure the fuck don’t know what it means. I’m a cat who works from his balls, with his hands. I know what it’s about now. I think I really do. Even if I go under. But I don’t think I will. Now.”[31]

The phrase “I’m a cat who works from his balls” encapsulates a bold assertion of deriving strength and guidance from a deeply instinctual, primal source. For Fonny, “balls” signify more than a physical attribute; the term speaks to a raw emotional power, courage, and authenticity. To “work from his balls” then implies that Fonny operates from a place of unfiltered truth and visceral emotion, which aligns with the erotic as conceptualized by Baldwin, Lorde, Keen, Reid Pharr, and

Holland—more than the sexual sense, a profound, life-affirming energy that encompasses passion, creativity, and intuition. The erotic, the sensual, suggests a fiercely honest and unapologetically direct way of being and creating that is deeply attuned to our innate desires and feelings.

Holland and Pharr's discourse on erotic choice and community resonates with Keen's insight that "there is no I without a thou. Individuality is created by relationship. Love is a relationship that creates its own terms. This means that the evidence that the universe harbors some kindly intent toward the individual can be collected and evaluated only within the courtroom of the individual's most intimate relationships."[32] Keen, Pharr, Holland, and Lorde support Baldwin's existential notion that our interactions shape self-perception, with the erotic as a reflection and component of what being human and in community means.

The Sensual Profanity in "Balls"

Baldwin has deep connection to "balls" and seems to intimate that everyone begins life with a pair. Yet, the vernacular connotes profanity. In addition to relieving stress, using profanity can help those who feel powerless reclaim a semblance of agency. Profanity as resistance assists Black male character development and aids our understanding of their social positions, frustrations, pains, and outrage. White Americans voyeuristically experience Black male anger from the relative safety of profanity—avoidance, objectification, fear—distanced from the formidable physicality that could incite violence. Baldwin and his characters employ profanity as political defiance against the oppressor, a refusal to be dehumanized, a call to collective identity and behavior as aggressive, dismissive, or disrespectful actions that undermine trust and community building.

In Baldwin's oeuvre, "balls" emerge as a metaphor for creative and existential bravery, where Baldwin and his male characters tap into the core, often most

powerful feminine aspects of their being and, yet the most vulnerable. In this view, the testicles, symbolizing the erotic and generative power, represent a wellspring of emotional and sensual energy that drives personal identity, agency, and connection. Exposing the most vulnerable, tender parts of male anatomy for public scrutiny elevates testicles as the seat of emotional power and the erotic for Baldwin, a place where, as Lorde opines, the sensual offers an opening for "recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives," which "can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."[33] A person's character may be measured by their testicular fortitude.

A Profanity of Refusal

Together, Lorde, Keen, Pharr, Holland, Ngai, and Kristeva imply that our feelings comprise the benchmark for measuring racial reconciliation, observed privately and publicly by the presence and prevalence of genuine relationships: intimacy rooted in mutual respect, understanding, and affection across racial lines. Should we choose to build community and reconcile race, we will know these relationships by their freedom from profanity—by their sensual connection—by their ability to flourish in authentic, shared experiences.

I draw from Lorde to operationalize sensuality thusly: "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society."[34] The erotic, then, holds transformative power. More than sexuality or sex, the erotic lends to the sensual, which constitutes life-affirming energy. People may create genuine social change by tapping into this power, moving beyond superficial reforms to address deeply rooted systemic issues.

Connecting to sensuality affirms identity and creativity in contrast to racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic social constructs. To embrace sensuality means embracing personhood as an act of resistance and activism against oppressive structures.

Baldwin's work includes a specter of profanity beyond language, a profanity impeding our ability to form genuine relationships, particularly those that require deep intimacy grounded by mutual respect across racial lines. Profane behavior often manifests as actions that are aggressive, dismissive, or disrespectful toward others' identities, experiences, or feelings. Such behaviors can severely undermine the trust and respect needed to build intimacy, making it difficult to achieve closeness and experience empathy, especially across racial divides already under strain due to systemic biases and historical injustices. A profanity of refusal haunts Baldwin's work, an unwillingness to connect that I describe as deliberate and obstinate behaviors where a person or community chooses not to engage, empathize, or acknowledge others' perspectives, emotions, or rights. This behavior goes beyond avoidance to intentionally disengage from the efforts necessary to build meaningful relationships, particularly in contexts where those connections might cultivate greater social cohesion, understanding, and progress. A profanity of refusal denotes the refusal to connect, an active choice to remain isolated within one's beliefs and experiences, which harms relationships and creates a hostile environment where people feel unsafe to express their feelings or share their experiences.

Hence, a profanity that corrupts or distorts erotic energy shows up as white oppression in Baldwin's work. A sociopathy that perverts erotic energy inheres in white supremacist ecologies and operates rhetorically in his narratives. It manifests in numerous ways, suppressing authentic desires, imposing harmful stereotypes, or exploiting and manipulating intimate relationships, all serving as metaphors for or examples of the broader dynamics of racial oppression. For instance, in the short story "This Morning, This Evening So Soon," Baldwin

illuminates white sociopathy. The protagonist-actor draws from the fear and anxiety experienced in white social spaces to posit a rhetorical question: “How can one be prepared for the spittle in the face, all the tireless ingenuity which goes into the spite and fear of small, unutterably miserable people, whose greatest terror is the singular identity, whose joy, whose safety, is entirely dependent upon the humiliation and anguish of others?”[35] The actor’s invocation of being spat upon lends visceral energeia to the experience of American Blacks in white America. Moreover, the notion of a people “whose joy, whose safety, is entirely dependent upon the humiliation and anguish of others” feels beyond profane, classic sociopathic behavior.

Even considering such profanity, Baldwin’s impulse toward sensuality invites estranged Americans who identify as Black and white to (re)cross the settler colonialist hinterland and return to the untamed wilderness of spiritual connection where self-alienation may reconcile with community. Reconnection is accomplished through self-awareness, self-determination, and honest relationships, connection imbued by the sensual, seared by flames of personal and political truth.

Sensual Profanity, A Force for Change

To US Americans who identify as Black, Baldwin opines, “We cannot be free until they are free”[36]—everybody. Western culture relies heavily on masculine energy, denying the human yearning for life-affirming emotional connection. Mislabeling masculine energy and our emotional needs and their expressions leads to a warped understanding of the erotic, manifesting in forms like pornography and obscenity, essentially perverting our deepest feelings.[37] Moreover, when we ignore the role of the erotic in cultivating and sustaining our power, our fortitude and resilience, we disregard and disconnect our own bodies and spirits from our intellects. Eliding our erotic desires for one another, we treat each other as mere

tools for gratification. In doing so, we cancel opportunities to genuinely revel in satisfying acts and interactions based on our shared traits and unique differences.[38] Maria Lugones, in her 1987 essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" contends that we fail to visit one another's worlds.[39]

The erotic resides in a distinctly spiritual realm, anchored in the strength of ancient wisdom and personal truths typically either unexpressed or unacknowledged. For oppression to sustain itself, it must taint or warp those divine inner fountains of power in the oppressed culture, which are essential for driving life-affirming transformation.[40] To effectively harness our erotic sensibilities, we must first acknowledge their existence.

Baldwin reflects on a school principal in the Southern US, musing:

> But I could not avoid wondering if he had ever really looked at a Negro and wondered about the life, the aspirations, the universal humanity hidden behind the dark skin. As I wondered, when he told me that race relations in this city were excellent and had not been strained by recent developments, how on earth he managed to hold on to his delusion.[41]

Here, Baldwin implores white Americans, represented by this principal, to connect with Black students and Black people more broadly in ways that are more truthful, more human, and more sensual and authentic. His call is more than an appeal to tolerance; it's a demand for an intimate literacy, an embodied literacy, that reaches beyond surface interactions and into the uncomfortable, sensuous truth of human connection, thus dismantling the delusions that sustain racism.

Baldwin also points out that political apathy perpetuates the US's divisions: "I sometimes think, with despair, that Americans will swallow whole any political speech whatever—we've been doing very little else, these last, bad years."[42] Baldwin's despair at the American tendency to unquestioningly digest any form of political speech points to a social abjection, an uncritical and profane acceptance that signifies a collective detachment from a genuine, active desire for truth or

understanding, lives removed from desire. Bear in mind that "there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion."[43]

Numerous Baldwin characters find themselves exiled between sensuality and profanity's liminal boundaries, and his reflections on US societal tendencies regarding political speech, racialized disgust, and a detachment from genuine desire that yearns for human connection exemplify abject profanity as a force rescued by sensuality: "Perhaps we [are], all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love."[44] A passive consumption, an exclusion from actively pursuing deeper, more meaningful relationships or political discourse, mirrors an abject state of being, an ontology outside the realm of authentic desire and engagement. Sensuality can set America free!

Through sensuality and profanity, Lorde, Kristeva, and Ngai nurture a relational kaleidoscope through which to observe cultural literacy enacted through Baldwinian truths. Connected to our sensuality, we "become less willing to accept powerlessness" or any other artificial "supplied states of being . . . such as resignation, despair, self- effacement, depression, self-denial."[45] Sensuality, our prime mover, prevents us from dismissing negative emotions as mere reflections of race and class-based resentment. By centering profanity, Baldwin, the "incorrigible maverick,"[46] deftly blends sensuality and profanity as provocative literacies for healing US racism, literacies grounded in the feminine energeia located in Baldwin's balls.

Reflecting on this essay's epigraph, Baldwin's assertion that music originates not as melody but as a primal cry, a raw, visceral response to pain, loss, or profound transformation, we grasp the essence of his broader critique. Like music, the

struggle against racial injustice begins not in polished rhetoric but in an embodied, instinctive outcry for recognition and liberation. Baldwin compels us to confront the cries society relentlessly attempts to silence, reminding us that beneath each refined narrative, every comfortable illusion, lies a persistent and unsettling truth: human anguish demands to be heard. To move beyond our racial and social divides, we must stop drowning out these voices with political chaos and instead acutely attune ourselves to their rhythms. Only then may we transform these primal, often agonizing cries into songs of connection, humanity, and eventually harmony, an exemplar of critical cultural literacy.

Notes

1. James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (Dell Publishing, 1978), 92–3. ↩
2. Aaron Ngozi Oforlea, *James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and the Rhetorics of Black Male Subjectivity* (Ohio State University Press, 2017), 97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzcz5c6.7 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzcz5c6.7> . ↩
3. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (Vintage International, 1962). 43. ↩
4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Bloomsbury Academic, 1992), 82; Paulo Freire and Donaldo P. Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987), 29, 35; Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, (Westview Press, 1998), xiv–xv, 31. ↩
5. Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, (Feminist Constructions, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 77–100. ↩
6. Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed*. (Grand Central Publishing, 2020); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After the End of the World* (Duke University Press, 2018); and Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton University Press, 2022). ↩
7. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 53. ↩
8. James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be American," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (Beacon Press, 2021), 173. ↩
9. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53. ↩

10. Sam Keen, *The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving* (Harper San Francisco, 1992), 243. ↩

11. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 1, 3. ↩

12. Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York University Press, 2007), 99. ↩

13. Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go*, 110. ↩

14. Lawrence A Davis, "James Baldwin: Mimic & Mastery," paper presented at Women's and Gender Studies, Claremont Graduate University, 2023.) to modernism as Baldwin's focus shifts from private to public spaces. The emotionally evocative short story holds a moral lesson driven by the antagonist's guilt and desire for human connection. Jesse, a "white man," is "caught in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed by a child" and has "been subtly and hideously displaced" by confrontations with blackness felt within his balls:[12. James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" (Vintage International, 1965), 234. ↩

15. Baldwin, *Going*, 247–48. ↩

16. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 25. ↩

17. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 27. ↩

18. Keen, *Passionate Life*, 31. ↩

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Futurist Forensics: Indigenous Evidence, Cosmo-Epistemologies, and the New Red Order

by Patrick Brian Smith | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT This article critically engages with the emerging "media forensic" turn at the intersection of visual culture, new media practice, and humanitarian and political activism. This field purports to subvert dominant forensic and surveillant regimes, weaponizing these mediated modalities to document acts of humanitarian and political violence. Such practices have been widely celebrated for enhancing forms of legal and political accountability and justice. However, there are concerns that these practices may inadvertently mirror the state-sanctioned regimes of control and power they wish to expose, reinforcing settler-colonial histories of the forensic and evidentiary, whilst also excluding counter-hegemonic and experimental modes of emergent media investigation. To address these limitations, this article proposes a radical counter-history and praxis of the forensic, drawing on Indigenous epistemologies and critical decolonial thought. Analysing the work of the Indigenous media collective the New Red Order (NRO), the article argues that their ongoing *Culture Capture* project (2017–) exemplifies a counter-hegemonic mode of emergent media forensic practice. By asserting Indigenous epistemological agency over such modes of media investigation, the NRO challenges Western forensic practices' hegemony. The article advocates for expanding the scope of media forensic work to include diverse publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices that offer subversive, decolonial forms of evidentiary practice.

KEYWORDS Indigenous epistemology, activism, art, new media, settler colonialism

Introduction

We have recently witnessed a “media forensic” turn, operating at the intersection of visual culture, human rights activism, and new media practice. Within this emergent field, dominant forensic and evidentiary techniques are subverted—taken up to create archives that document acts of state and corporate violence. These visual modalities are thus weaponized against their own violent and surveillant logics.[1] Such modes of forensic counter-praxis have been widely embraced, heralded as opening new modalities of accountability and resistance.[2] This article begins by briefly examining the conceptual and practical limitations of the emerging forensic turn. It argues that there is a risk that such practices unquestioningly mirror or mimic visual modalities of the state-sanctioned forensic and surveillance regimes that they wish to critique, problematically re-stabilizing settler-colonial ontologies, visualities, and histories of the evidentiary and forensic. Moreover, it suggests that such forms of mirroring or mimicry risk excluding counter-hegemonic and subaltern modes of evidentiary and investigative work.[3]

To redress the shortcomings of such modes of practice, the rest of the article maps out a radical counter-history and contemporary praxis of the forensic, one that is indebted to Indigenous epistemologies and attendant modes of critical decolonial thought. Engaging with the Indigenous media collective the New Red Order, the article reads their recent *Culture Capture* project as constitutive of a radically counter-hegemonic mode of media forensic practice. It argues that the New Red Order have fostered an Indigenously-structured mode of evidentiary work that aims to reassert Indigenous epistemological agency in contemporary modes of media investigation, whilst also highlighting the crucial place of Indigenous cosmologies in the broader histories of the evidentiary and forensic. Building on Joseph Pugliese’s important work in this area, the article examines how modern Western forensic practices have deep points of interconnection with,

and are often indebted to, Indigenous cosmologies and animistic thought.[4] The work of the New Red Order aims to revivify the links to these foundational Indigenous epistemologies. Through this examination, the article argues that the scope of the domains within which such counter forensic work can be conducted must be expanded, re-examining which publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices can be included in its scope, as they offer speculative, experimental, and counter-hegemonic forms of evidentiary practice to resist multifarious forms of settler-colonial and neo-colonial violence.

Limits of the Media Forensic

A range of artists, researchers, and media collectives have developed and deployed emergent media tools to transform the roles that the aesthetic and technological play in the mediation of visual evidence and its capacity to intervene in humanitarian, social, and political struggle. Much of this work, which I have elsewhere termed "mediated forensics," is broadly defined as "a process of collectively assembling accounts of incidents from media flotsam . . . noticing unintentional evidence registered in visual, audio or data files or in the material composition of our environment."[5] Such processes of investigation and assemblage are conducted through the utilization of emergent tools and technologies (photogrammetry, 3D modelling and scanning, geolocation, pattern analysis, remote sensing and mapping, computer vision, amongst others) to help synthesize, examine, and recompose varied forms of evidence. Through this approach, diverse types of evidence are examined and transformed to generate alternative archives aimed at building new modes of accountability and resistance.

The concept of the counter forensic was originally put forward by photographer and theorist Allan Sekula. Much of his work focused on an exploration of the relationship between visual culture, evidence, and human rights. For him, the

practice of counter forensics aimed to re-weaponize forms of state-produced forensic visual evidence, creating counter-archives that could hold to account the same networks of power responsible for generating them.[6] As Thomas Keenan suggests, counter forensics "refers to nothing less than the adoption of forensic techniques as a practice of 'political manoeuvring,' as a tactical operation in a collective struggle, a rogues' gallery to document the microphysics of barbarism."[7] Thus, the "counter" of the counter forensic highlights the need to subversively take up forms of visual material that are often produced by those responsible for such acts of "barbarism." As Keenan continues, "the history of . . . forensics is marked by this asymmetrical reversal of state policing techniques into tactics for resisting and challenging injustice."[8] Up until now, the deployment of counter forensic strategies and practices across a wide variety of media investigations have been widely accepted. The forensic has become a malleable conceptual armature through which to examine the interconnections between the technological, aesthetic, legal, and political in an era of data oversaturation, post-truth politics, and misinformation.

Here, I want to briefly consider the limitations of such contemporary counter forensic work. As I've argued elsewhere, specifically in relation to projects exposing acts of environmental violence, these countering practices frequently replicate hypervisible and transparent methods of visualization and mediation that have long shaped approaches—and perceptions—of top-down state surveillance, oversight, and control.[9] Such forms of mirroring or mimicry risk a reproduction of the forensic "colonial gaze," in so far as they rely on similar occularcentric modes of visualization and address. To provide an example of a project that risks such forensic mirroring and mimicry, let us briefly focus on the National Monument Audit, produced by Monument Lab in partnership with the Mellon Foundation.

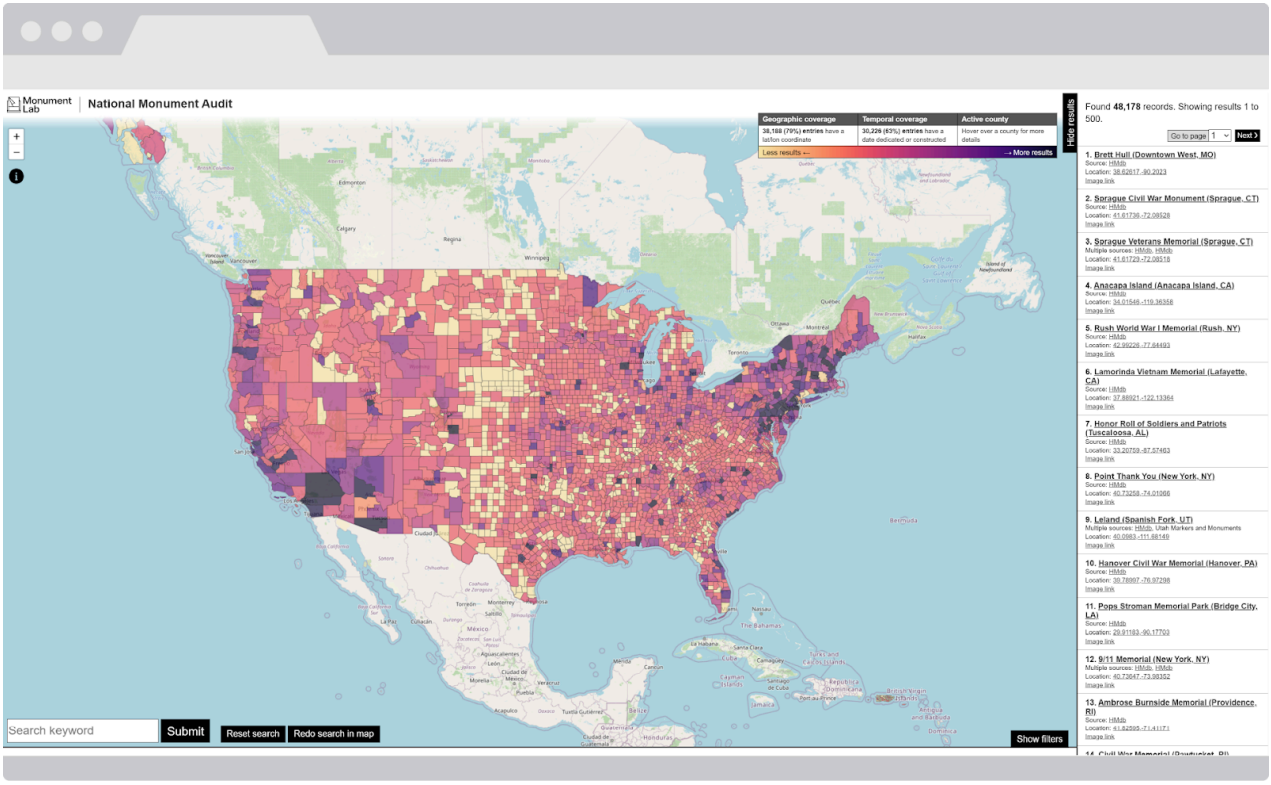

Fig. 1 Screenshot of "Monument Study Set Search Interface."

Monument Lab is a nonprofit public art, history, and design studio based in Philadelphia. They aim to reimagine monuments as "spaces for belonging, learning, and healing." As their mission statement suggests, they believe "that our unreconciled past and our inherited monument landscape continue to reinforce systems of injustice, haunt our present, and impact our individual and collective futures."[10] One of their flagship projects was the 2021 National Monument Audit. The Monument Lab team spent half a year "scouring almost a half million records of historic properties created and maintained by federal, state, local, tribal, institutional, and publicly assembled sources."[11] They collected data on a study set of 50,000 monuments, aiming to "better understand the dynamics and trends that have shaped our monument landscape, to pose questions about common knowledge about monuments, and to debunk falsehoods and misperceptions within public memory."[12] One of the central outputs from the project was the Monument Study Set Search Interface, which allows users to explore an

interactive archive of documented monuments. The interface consists of a navigable map of the United States, divided by county. Clicking on a county zooms the user into a localized map of the area, with each archived monument represented by a blue marker. Opening the individual record for each monument provides a whole raft of additional information: photographs; description; historical data; specific geographical coordinates; location description; object group (monument, bust, statue etc.); and a list of featured subjects. The project is an important intervention, undertaken following several nationwide protests from 2017 onwards, which were a response to the white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, opposing the decision of the city council to remove the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Lee Park.

The project is a clear example of a counter forensic practice, utilizing publicly accessible digital records and media artefacts to construct a counter archive of the United States' forms of public memorialization. Indeed, two of the key findings from the project are that "the monument landscape is overwhelmingly white and male" and "the most common features of the American monuments reflect war and conquest."[13] However, it is arguable that the cartographic form of the interface is both politically problematic and limiting. It is well known that cartographic practices were integral to the operations and expansions of settler-colonial projects globally, both historically and contemporarily.[14] For example, Jeffrey C. Stone has explored how maps were not merely passive, objective tools for representation but were also active instruments of power that facilitated and legitimized colonial expansion.[15] Stone examines how mapping practices helped organize colonial administrative systems; aid in military campaigns; streamline economic exploitation; and further propaganda initiatives, to name but a few. Ultimately, cartographic practices tend to concentrate power and agency in the hands of those who construct them.

Counter forensic practices like the National Monument Audit risk inadvertently reproducing the forensic "colonial gaze," in so far as they rely on similar

cartographic modes of visualization and address. Nishat Awan, focusing on similar mapping projects, suggests that "such seeing operates through a fantasy of a frictionless world that can be accessed by zooming in and out of far-flung places viewed through scopic regimes that render certain aspects hyper visible while obscuring others."[16] For her, whilst such cartographic practices "allow us to 'see' further and deeper into places that are at a distance from us," they also create "conditions that make certain racialized and subaltern subjects recede from view."[17] Whilst providing a mesmerizing digital archive, projects such as this risk eliding "embodied experience while assuming making visible to be an emancipatory act in itself."[18] Thus, there is a risk that Monument Lab's desires for hyper visibility within their mapping project means that the agency of the diverse communities whose daily lives are impacted by these monuments and statues is not adequately accounted for within the fabric of its design. How do these groups envisage the futures of these monuments? What forms of redress or justice do they imagine? Such elements could, and should, have shaped the very design of the audit and its interface.[19]

As suggested previously, such forms of counter forensic work risk drawing us back to the very forms of settler-colonial control that they seek to push back against. The risk here is that there is a mirroring or mimicry of dominant surveillant technologies and visualities that are always indelibly connected to the longer punitive and colonial histories of forensic and documentary work. Indeed, as Pugliese has suggested, we cannot forget that modern forensics emerged as a techno-scientific epistemology that both enacted and legitimated racist, punitive, and surveillant forms of state control and violence.[20] These engrained cultural and technological histories of the forensic have not been adequately accounted for within this emergent discourse and praxis. I have argued elsewhere that the tendency for such emergent practices to "mirror" or "mimic" arguably responds to what James Frieze has termed a broader cultural "economy of legibility," a "cultural imperative for justice not only to be done but to be seen to be done . . . a dominant cultural logic that instrumentalises the forensic's promise to colonise

knowledge."[21] There is a risk that these practices replicate the very modes of the forensic and surveillant that they wish to subversively engage. They are drawn back into the wider "economy of legibility" from which they wish to break away. Moreover, by remaining wedded to dominant modalities and visualities of the forensic and surveillant, such modes of counter-praxis risk bypassing alternative experimental, counter-hegemonic, and decolonial modalities of evidentiary and documentary work.

Here, my aim is to suggest that we must confront the historical formation and contemporary cultural uptake of the forensic as it is embraced and deployed across increasingly diverse fields of practice. I want to emphasize that powerful, counter-hegemonic modes of forensic investigation are emerging. By embracing a more poly-perspectival definition of the forensic, we can begin to consider the radical potential of these alternative modes of investigatory work. At their most powerful, forms of investigation must be non-hegemonic, non-hierarchical practices, and, as a result, widening the scales across which we can read the "counter forensic" as a form of cultural and connective practice is crucial. Indeed, one of the most powerful and politically productive facets of the contemporary turn to the forensic is its foregrounding of the notion of the "forum" as a space of communal and collective gathering and debate. The word "forensic" comes from the Latin word *forensis*, which has its etymology in the "forum." As Eyal Weizman has suggested, "when the Roman orators . . . used the term, they referred to more than just the legal sphere. The forum was a chaotic and multidimensional domain . . . in which both people and things participated and were presented."[22] However, when the emphasis is placed on logics of hypervisibility, mastery, and legibility, the productive multidimensionality of the forensic as a particular modality of "forum work" is, to a certain extent, bypassed. Thus, this paper aims to re-situate the multidimensionality of the forum that exists at the etymological base of the forensic. I want to suggest that we must push for a conceptualization of the forensic as a *communal and multitudinous* set of spaces and sites—as well as an experimental and counter-hegemonic variety of practices—rather than a limited

set of emergent technical and technological dispositifs. We must expand the scope of the domains within which such forensic work can be conducted, re-examining which publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices can be included in its scope, as they might allow speculative and counter-hegemonic forms of investigatory practice to emerge. This is where the radical potential of the forensic lies, in its multifaceted base.

Futurist Forensics

To examine the possible radical and alternative futures of the forensic and its modes of investigation, I want to map out a counter-history and counter-praxis of the forensic. To offer an example of such a mode of counter-praxis, I will focus on the work of the Indigenous media collective the New Red Order (referred to as the NRO hereafter). The group works across different media forms—video, installation, sculpture, performance—blending satire, humor, and political critique "to create grounds for Indigenous futures."[23] The group is headed by Ojibwe brothers and filmmakers Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil and Tlingit visual artist Jackson Polys.[24] The name is a reference to the Improved Order of the Red Men (referred to as the IORM hereafter), a fraternal secret society organization established in North America in 1834. As Adam Khalil suggests, "it's like Freemasons, except they dressed up as Indians."[25] Indeed, "playing Indian" was a key dimension of the IORM's early activities. As Jackson Polys suggests, "these are dynamics that were part of the desire to feel at home . . . to differentiate one's self from a prior lineage. This was combined with the desire to eliminate the savage, but also to become the savage . . . one would 'play Indian', to embody one's own fantasy, and . . . in some ways, make that fantasy become reality."[26] The NRO subverts and re-weaponizes many of the deeply racist and settler-colonial logics of the IORM, developing a radically subversive version of this settler-colonial secret society.

Indeed, the NRO clearly mark themselves out as a "public secret society." This framing has a two-layered meaning for the group. Firstly, it highlights that they are a decidedly open and collaborative organization: "anyone can become a member of the New Red Order," says Adam Khalil, though "there has to be a willingness to become an accomplice."[27] Indeed, the group is formed of a rotating network of settler "informants and accomplices" who participate in acts of decolonial praxis. Secondly, the group also interpolate Michael Taussig's articulation of "the public secret" into their framing as a public secret society. For Taussig, the public secret is "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated."[28] The concept of the "public secret" entails the formation of individuals who are aware of certain knowledge that they must not acknowledge.[29] As Adam Khalil has suggested, within the US context, the biggest public secret is the fact that the country "is predicated on the removal and replacement of Indigenous people."[30] Thus, the group takes up this dual meaning of the "public secret" to forge a public network of "informants and accomplices" that try and decolonially expose and subvert US settler-colonialism and its attendant logics of subjugation.

Here, I will primarily focus on the group's ongoing *Culture Capture* project (2017–). The central strand of the project is a multimedia and multi-sited investigation exploring the potentialities of digitally recreating and animating US settler-colonial monuments and statues through techniques of 3D scanning/modelling. The project responds (and builds upon) both the settler-colonial statue protests across the United States, as well as the longer histories of Indigenous opposition to broader forms of settler-colonial monumentalization. These protests led to the removal of many settler-colonial monuments throughout the country. However, for the NRO, such desires for "removal" failed to acknowledge the term's long and charged history for Native American peoples.[31] Opposing such desires for removal, the NRO aimed to build "additive or subtractive approaches, for *revising* the monuments themselves."[32] Using 3D laser scanners, 360 degree cameras, and photogrammetry techniques, the NRO set out to digitally document and "capture" a wide variety of settler-colonial

monuments across the US. From these acts of digital capture, the group then created digital 3D replicas of the monuments that could be animated, morphed, and recomposed. For the NRO, these technologies enabled the group to make "additive interventions into pre-existing things, as opposed to advocating for their removal or destruction."[33] Within this project, a similar set of cultural objects are examined through visual techniques typically associated with counter forensic media practices (3D modelling and digital photogrammetry). These are utilized to investigate histories of settler-colonial violence and attendant modes of memorialization. However, whilst the NRO takes up a similar set of objects to the Monument Lab audit, I want to argue that a markedly different *counter-epistemology* of the forensic emerges in their work. I want to contend that the NRO takes up these emerging investigative techniques and technologies to make two primary interventions.

Firstly, their work aims to craft a radically decolonial and futurist forensic practice —one that operates in markedly different ways to the emergent counter forensic practices explored at the outset of this paper. The work of the NRO forces us to consider a broader Indigenous counter-history and counter-praxis of the forensic, which moves us away from its connections to Western scientific and cartographic epistemologies and back towards its foundations within Indigenous animist and cosmological thinking. As we shall see, the 3D models created by the NRO do not result in stable simulacra of the settler colonial statues captured. Instead, their digital models morph and shift, imbuing them with a decidedly *animistic* force. Pugliese has explored the historical connections between Western forensic practices and Indigenous animist cosmologies. He argues that Indigenous animistic thought, which views the world as filled with active entities, has parallels with modern Western forensic science. Despite the crucial role of Indigenous forensic expertise, Pugliese contends that it is often marginalized and excluded from Western forensic histories, reinforcing a dichotomy that dismisses Indigenous practices as superstitions "infra-epistemologies" and prevents the recognition of Native science.[34] Thus, I argue that the NRO fashions a radically

alternative mode of experimental and counter-hegemonic forensic practice that is drawn back to the animistic roots of Native science and broader cosmological ontologies.[35] This mode of decolonial forensic practice undermines and disrupts the forensics' deep historical entwinements with settler-colonial violence and surveillance.[36]

Secondly, this alternative approach to the forensic also asks us to consider radical alternatives to hegemonic conceptualizations of ontological truth, realism, and facticity. I argue that the work of the NRO fashions alternative modalities of "truth construction" that move us away from the modes of documentation and stable facticity found in the contemporary constellation of counter forensic work examined above (which are always tainted by their imbrication into the broader "economies of legibility" that Frieze delineates). Within the work of the NRO, the 3D models are subversively captured, animated, and morphed—becoming active, fluid agglomerations that serve to deconstruct the stable settler-colonial realities and narratives embodied, quite literally, by their physical counterparts. Indeed, the group have spoken of their desire for their work to "commit crimes against reality."[37] These realities the NRO speak of are the manifold hegemonies that structure the settler-colonial state. Thus, tied into this commitment to deconstruct such realities is a simultaneous desire to generate alternative, Indigenously-informed futurities. These alternative modes of evidentiary and forensic work found in the NRO's practice opens us up to conceptual frameworks akin to Toby Lee's notion of "unreality effects" or LaCharles Ward's concept of "Black visual evidence," which can offer a "counter visual archive of the legally permissible."[38] For them, it is crucial to understand how the evidentiary and forensic have always served to prop up the settler-colonial state, whilst simultaneously destroying racialized lifeworlds. However, for Lee and Ward, there are fundamental ways in which the forensic and evidentiary can "operate otherwise"[39] or invite us "to reimagine the grounds of the evidentiary."[40] Thus, building from these interventions into contemporary modes of counter evidentiary work, I want to suggest that the NRO is similarly invested in developing

speculative, experimental, and counter-hegemonic forms of evidentiary practice to resist multifarious forms of settler-colonial violence.[41] In the next section of this article, I turn to one of the video works that forms part of the broader *Culture Capture* project, initially examining how the aesthetic and discursive strategies employed by the NRO help them to construct their "crimes" against settler-colonial realities. From here, I then turn to the broader linkages between forensic histories and Indigenous epistemologies, arguing that the NRO develops a counter-hegemonic forensics that is rooted in the animistic foundations of Native science and broader cosmological epistemologies.

Crimes Against Reality: *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition*

Currently, three video works and several installations make up the Culture Capture project: *Culture Capture 001*, 2017; *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition*, 2019; *Culture Capture: Crimes Against Reality*, 2020. To help map out the theoretical and political stakes of such a futurist-oriented forensic practice, here I will focus on the project's second video work, *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition*. This work offers a good distillation of the project's overall conceptual and thematic concerns, whilst also opening up powerful points of interconnection to the previously-examined forensic turn in media culture. The film opens with a compilation of interwoven clips from a variety of 2017 news reports documenting various "vandalized" and defaced settler-colonial monuments across the United States. Initially, we are presented with several Christopher Columbus statues across the state of Connecticut, another in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, and, finally, one in Houston, Texas, all of which have been coated—to varying degrees—in red paint. In addition, we are presented with news footage of a freshly beheaded statue of Franciscan friar Junipero Serra outside the Old Mission in Santa Barbara, California. Under Serra's leadership, many "thousands of Native

Americans across Alta California were absorbed into Catholic missions" where they were "pressed into forced labour and infected with diseases to which they had no resistance"—acts of settler-colonial violence that were tantamount to cultural genocide.[42] As we are shown shots of the now covered lump of the Serra statue outside the Old Mission building, the reporter suggests that this act of concealment was done to "keep the graphic scene from the view of visitors."

Fig. 2 Stills from *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition* (2019).

In the case of the Serra statue, it is arguable that a triple logic of "removal" is in operation. Firstly, we have the statue's iconophilic memorialization of a figure who was responsible for the violent, genocidal erasure of Alta California's Indigenous communities. Secondly, we have the protesters' removal of Serra's head, precisely as an act of protest against the memorialization of the first act of erasure. Thirdly, we have the concealment of the beheaded statue, precisely as a way to remove the "graphic scene" from the public's field of vision. As the voice of the final new reporter fades, the final line of their monologue states that these acts of defacement and protest come "amid an ongoing debate over confederate statues across the US."

After the opening news reports, the film then moves into a sequence of rapid montage. Here, we are presented with a vast archive of images documenting the work of James Earle Fraser. Fraser was an American sculptor whose work was informed by his settler-colonial, frontier upbringing across the West of the United States. Each archival image remains present for just a split second, documenting the working practice of Fraser as well as partially finished models and renderings of his statues. We see Fraser working on clay models, and we see photographic portraits of Native Americans for use in future works. The rapidity of this montage seems to be focused less on the individual development of his statues as discreet artworks. Rather, through the cumulative bricolage of this archival montage, the NRO seems to point towards Fraser's broader obsession with Native American culture.[43]

Fig. 3 Stills from *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition* (2019).

This dual settler-colonial desire for both assimilation and domination forms a key part of the NRO's critical praxis, and is expressed particularly acutely in the next section of *Terminal Addition*.[44]

A close-up on the hair and forehead of Fraser's 1919 bust sculpture of Theodore Roosevelt (entitled *Theodore Roosevelt as Rough Rider*), transitions to a match cut shot of Jim Fletcher, one of the NRO's collaborators. In other works, Fletcher, an established avant-garde actor, describes himself as a "reformed Native American impersonator."[45] Over the matched shot of Fletcher's forehead, we hear him whisper "images that represent the settlement of this land unconsciously inform our inability to comprehend our settler reality." Next, Fletcher addresses the camera directly, stating "I'm an accomplice to Indigenous people, and for the purpose of this video you can think of me as their proxy." Fletcher's narration continues during the next sequence, which examines another statue. We are no longer in the archive, instead we find ourselves outside in a courtyard, on a grey, overcast day. A wide angle establishing shot frames this new statue centrally in the image. A figure stands atop a crop of rocks, their head tilted and body contorted as they point a fully drawn bow towards the sky. This is the *Saltine Warrior*, outside the Carnegie Library at Syracuse University. We move from the opening wide shot of the statue to a closer, low angle shot, framing the statue's torso. A series of red laser lines begin to cut across the statue, scanning its form and contours. Next, we see a figure clad in a translucent silicone mask. The mask covers their whole head, rendering them faceless and unidentifiable. The silicone has a partially melted appearance, almost creating an illusion that their head is gradually dissolving.

These are the NRO's non-Native accomplices, masked to protect their identities and simultaneously to allow them to engage in acts of "playing Indian"—exploring the attendant "unseemly desires and inappropriate impulses" that such play produces. Again, we are reminded of the acts of appropriation that structured the early activities of the IORM. Here, however, such acts of playing Indian are

counter-hegemonically subverted, with the non-Native figures functioning as the NRO's accomplices and informants—operating against their own settler-colonial ideologies and histories, documenting these monuments so that they can be animistically deformed and altered. The accomplice holds a portable 360-degree camera in one hand and a laser scanner in the other, digitally capturing and documenting the statue. Over this image, we hear Fletcher's earlier statement once again, "images that represent the settlement of this land unconsciously inform our inability to comprehend our settler reality." Here, we move into another rapid montage, this time with shots that move us 360 degrees around the statue. Another masked figure holding similar scanning devices enters the frame, scanning between the statue's legs.

Fig. 4 Stills from *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition* (2019).

A third masked figure performs a smudging ritual, a ceremonial burning of medicinal or sacred plants as an act of purification and cleansing. We then shift to

a black screen, with a 3D rendered model of the statue—clearly generated from these multiple acts of scanning and capture— circling in the centre. The image occasionally glitches, shifting us between the empty virtual space of the black screen and the material site of the courtyard.

As touched upon at the opening of this section, in *Terminal Addition*, and across the *Culture Capture* project more broadly, there is a consistent emphasis on pushing back against the cultural logics and desires for "removal" when confronting the vexed histories of settler-colonial modes of monumentalization. Summarizing the work, the NRO suggests,

the concept of "removal' is central to current debates about whether to remove problematic historical monuments— for example, Confederate war monuments in the South. It was also in the name of the Indian Removal Act, signed into law by President Jackson, which resulted in the displacement and death of thousands of Native peoples in what we now call the 'Trail of Tears.' Both present removal as a quick fix.[46]

Thus, for the NRO, myriad forms of removal have structured Indigenous life under the settler-colonial state. For example, the 1830 Indian Removal Act initiated the Trail of Tears, leading to over 46,000 Native Americans being forcibly relocated to "Indian Territory" (now Oklahoma) and the deaths of over 4,000 due to disease, starvation, and harsh weather conditions. Thus, for Native American communities there is a deep history of settler-colonial violence associated with practices of removal, which extend back to these acts of forcible relocation and erasure. As a result, there was a certain hesitance—or perhaps even resistance—from the group to simply embrace the desires and logics of "removal" and "erasure" that were strong affective and political drivers in the rapid spread of the 2017 statue protests.

As Adam Khalil suggests elsewhere, "that kind of iconoclasm we have some trepidation around, because it's also the same means that the settler colonial

nation has used against us."[47] To simply remove objects that monumentalize, in myriad ways, the settler-colonial foundations of the United States perhaps serves to only further erase the histories and continuing contemporary realities of settler-colonial violence from the wider cultural and public imaginary. Indeed, as the NRO have suggested elsewhere, "there's a double-edged sword with indigeneity and erasure. Representation of Indian people is ubiquitous but it's also going away."[48] Conversely, a desire to simply preserve such monuments moves us back towards the events that were the touch paper of the 2017 protests, for example, the white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia throughout the earlier part of the year in the defense of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Lee Park.

To find a way out of this bind—between the desires for removal and preservation—the NRO proposed an "additive" and *animistic* approach instead. This logic was aimed at making "something new as opposed to tearing something down . . . the idea . . . was to take an additive approach to these types of complicated monuments. It's this kind of cumulative gesture that could maybe lead to more interesting futures than erasing and hiding [things]."[49] Thus, within *Culture Capture*, emergent media technologies and tools (primarily photogrammetry and 3D scanning and modelling) are taken up to additively alter and morph such objects of monumentalization, challenging what the NRO perceived to be the "quick fixes" of erasure and removal on the one hand, and the reactionary (and often white supremacist) desires for total preservation on the other. The slippery ontological ground between these two positions became a space of productive epistemological and political traction for the NRO.

In the film's final section, we move back inside the library archive, where the masked figures are now photographing various settler statues and models on their smartphones. They begin to crowd around Fraser's perhaps most infamous work, *End of the Trail*. The statue depicts a Native American figure slumped forward on his horse, weary and fatigued. Archival images documenting the

construction of the statue are intercut with the performative documentations in the space of the archive. Next, a 3D model of the statue is overlaid and begins to circle in the centre of the screen. Slowly, the archival images recede and we are left with the model circling at the centre of a black screen. The model shifts from a dull dark grey concrete to a red crystalline form. The shape of the monument then begins to expand and contract, becoming an amorphous blob extending in various directions at various speeds. We then shift into a rapid montage documenting a range of other statues, as another voice speaks: "the society of statues is mortal. One day their faces of stone crumble and fall to earth. This botany of death is what we call culture and this is how we capture it."

Through the deployment of such emergent modes of visual media practice, they were able to forge and mold animistic iterations of these monuments that were constantly unstable, existing in a state of productive flux. The desires for removal and preservation are both undergirded by logics of fixity and finality (the statue remains, or it is removed). The animistic approach of the NRO pushes for a more unstable and indeterminate mode of investigating such forms of monumentalization. The modes of destabilization and indeterminacy introduced by the NRO's animistic methodology can be understood in relation to broader epistemologies of Indigenous futurism. As Toby Lee has suggested, in her analysis of Khalil's earlier documentary work, the aim of such indeterminacy is to "reconfigure the relations between people, histories, and environment . . . its parallel and larger project is to mobilize the disquieting power of the Indigenous uncanny against the structures of the real."[50] The animistic and additive logics employed by the NRO's digital remodelling arguably also unfurls the "disquieting power" of the "Indigenous uncanny" against the settler-colonial realities that are solidified in these monuments. The shifting and amorphous structures of these animated digital simulations arguably serves to collapse the myths and lies upon which the United States as a settler-colonial state is built.

The final monument the documenters survey is the Columbus Monument in the centre of Syracuse. Again, they employ similar tactics and technologies to develop a 3D rendering of the statue. This digital rendering then appears on screen, animistically morphing and shifting in a similar fashion to the *End of the Trail*. Spreading outwards, with a gelatinous yet distinctly crystalline form, the statue becomes an amorphous lump, before finally disappearing completely. As Patrick Harrison suggests, "the computer simulacra of their beloved landmarks metastasize into bulging . . . gobs of necrotic, glitchy, digi-flesh and self-destruct."[51] Indeed, these fleshy digital duplicates become the structuring focus of the film's climax.

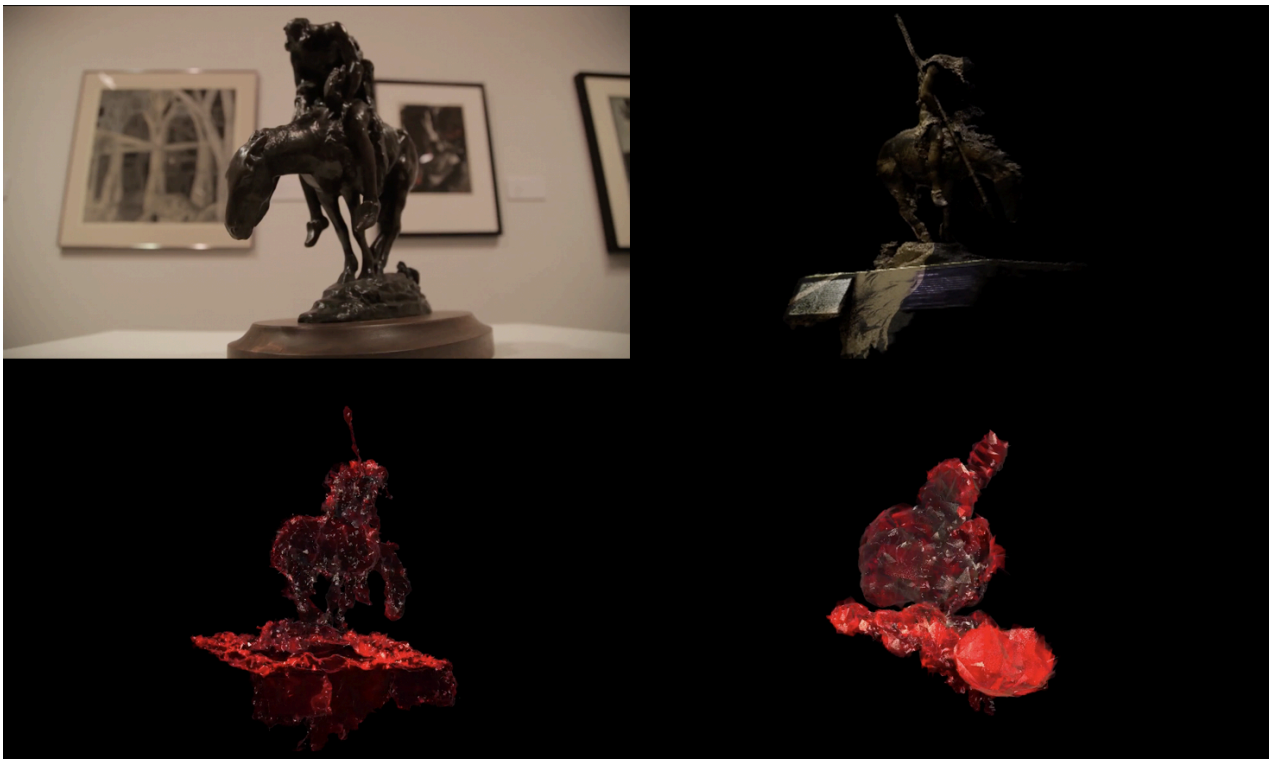

Fig. 5. Stills from *Culture Capture: Terminal Addition* (2019).

As briefly mentioned at the opening of this section, the modes of technological visioning used within the *Culture Capture* project are also found across a wide range of the counter forensic media practices. There are multiple examples of the

use of photogrammetry and 3D scanning and modelling to investigate, remodel, and recreate sites and spaces of political violence. Both modes of practice have a shared desire to take up such modes of technological visioning to investigate and expose instances of state, corporate, and colonial violence. At the same time however, there are clearly marked differences between the NRO's mode of additive and animistic editing and those modes of counter forensic practice examined at the outset of this paper.

Here, the NRO's embrace of these technologies functions in direct opposition to the "economy of legibility" that often consumes the counter forensic. Within the *Culture Capture* project, these modes of additive and animistic morphing and editing seek to destabilize contemporary settler-colonial realities and their attendant desires for both monumentalization and dissolution.[52] As Christopher Green suggests, "anticolonial struggle, the NRO maintains, must reconfigure colonial structures—including through crimes against present-day representation and reality—in order that they can be transformed."[53] In direct opposition to the counter forensics' "economy of legibility," the NRO enacts "crimes against reality," precisely to try and imagine alternative, Indigenously-informed and structured futurities. The NRO aims to edit and morph settler-colonial realities, rather than risk a slippage back into the "economy of legibility." Whilst the contemporary counter forensic methodology is based on replicating the dominant visual frameworks of authority, regulation, and simplistic clarity that have supported the public perception of forensic practices for decades, the NRO employ similar emerging media tools to deconstruct settler-colonial realities and execute their "crimes against reality." If there seems to be such a stark opposition here, between the economy of legibility that undergirds the counter forensic and "crimes against reality" that are crucial to the work of the NRO, why might it be productive to read the work of the latter as potentially constitutive of a mode of specifically *forensic* futurism? More basically, what is the connection between the practice of the NRO and these wider forensic epistemologies, beyond the presence of a set of technological practices that are markedly similar those

explored at the outset of this article? In the final section of this paper, I would like to turn back to the basic tenets of the forensic and its deep historical entanglements with Indigenous modes of thought and material practice. By mapping out this counter-history, I want to demonstrate how the work of the NRO aims to revivify connections to such Indigenous evidentiary histories and cosmologies.

Indigenous Counter-Epistemologies

In his book *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence*, Pugliese traces the deep historical interconnection between contemporary Western understandings of the forensic (which he reads primarily as a scientific-criminalistic epistemology) and Indigenous "animist cosmologies and epistemologies."[54] As Pugliese suggests, building on the work of Gregory Cajete, Indigenous animistic thought "choreographs one's engagement with the entities of the world; [it] . . . continually relates to and speaks of the world as full of active entities with which people engage."[55] Quoting Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Pugliese continues on to suggest that within such animist epistemologies, "the 'distinction between society and nature is internal to the social world,' thereby overturning the Eurocentric nature/culture binary that relegates nature to an external nonsocial world from which science extracts its truths and facts. In this worldview, the 'diverse type of actants or subjective agents' include 'gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artifacts as well.'"[56] Pugliese argues that a similar animist logic also informs modern Western forensic science, but its deep connections to such Indigenous ontologies have been severed:

Regardless of the crucial role of Indigenous forensic expertise across both domestic and international contexts, Indigenous forensic science simply fails to figure in the annals of Western forensic histories. The effacement of Indigenous

forensics from the Western canon is crucial in enabling Western science to secure the scientificity of its own practices precisely by categorizing Indigenous forensics as little more than (un)canny folk know-how, animist superstitions, or infraepistemologies that are dispatched beyond the policed domains of certified scientific knowledge; what becomes unthinkable in such a dichotomous schema, thus, is the very possibility of Native science.[57]

Here, Pugliese draws on the example of how Western colonial police forces in Australia employed "Indigenous trackers to find escaped criminals or lost civilians in the bush precisely because of their unerring capacity to be acutely attentive to the trace evidence inscribed in the landscape when tracking their subjects."[58] Despite exploiting the Indigenous trackers' deep reciprocal knowledge of the land, their abilities were simultaneously "rendered 'uncanny'" by the colonial police "through the occlusion and/or dismissal of their avowedly animist understanding of the land and all its entities."[59] Here then we find a particular double logic of co-optation and dismissal in place: A logic that at once exploited Indigenous trackers for their knowledge and labor whilst simultaneously framing (and disavowing) their work as fantastical, superstitious, or primitive.

Thus, within what he terms contemporary Western forensics' "disavowed animism," we find a similar emphasis on how mute objects are animated and allowed to testify. However, their ability to speak is always reliant on the rhetorical intervention of the certified (Western) scientific or criminalist expert; they are "'mute objects' that dumbly await the scientist to be brought to speaking life."[60] Pugliese suggests that such Indigenous animistic epistemologies thus "haunt the field of forensic science . . . forensics . . . is a field where the epistemology of Western science unreflexively crosses over into the domain of animist cosmologies and epistemologies."[61] A central aim of Pugliese's book is to place such Indigenous animist epistemologies at the heart of a retooled mode of forensic investigation, creating a methodology that better accounts for more-than-human actants and subjective agents. Moreover, such a retooled notion of

the forensic also aims to emphasize the evidentiary and investigative capacities of speculative modes of Indigenous thought and practice, what Pugliese terms "cosmo-epistemologies." Such cosmo-epistemologies are aimed at a refusal of "Euro-anthropocentric perspectives" and instead radically embrace "eco-ethical worldviews" of "relationality and animism."[62] Here then, I want to suggest that the animistic digital statues of *Terminal Addition* move us towards a conceptualization of the forensic that is firmly regrounded in the animism that structures the Indigenous "cosmo-epistemologies" that de Castro and Pugliese speak of. These fluid and shifting digital surrogates take on a life of their own, undermining the concretized settler-colonial realities of their physical counterparts.

Fig. 6 Aboriginal tracker in Fremantle, 1934.

The economies of legibility that structure the counter forensic practices we examined at the opening of this paper are still based on modes of realism and evidence that are determined by the settler-colonial state (and their apertures of visioning). They are insufficient and must be radically morphed and shifted, allowing for the emergence of alternative Indigenous modes of forensic and investigative work. Within *Culture Capture*, the objects of settler colonial violence and attendant monumentalization are imbued with animistic properties through the additive processes of scanning and modelling. They are morphed and altered, imbricated into a mode of cosmo-epistemlogical forensic analysis that reclaims the potentialities of Native science and simultaneously cracks apart contemporary settler-colonial realities. As Noah Caspar has argued, "these rendered models, generated from differently angled captured photographs, are then mutated via a glitch, or series of phase changes, that transforms them. This glitch, or interruption of normalcy, calls for a reevaluation of hegemonic relations that we refer to as reality."[63] Thus, through the animistic morphing and deforming of these settler-colonial monuments, the NRO enact their "crimes against reality" through the development of an Indigenously-informed mode of forensic practice. More precisely, there is a continued desire to reclaim the forensic's "disavowed animism," centering a counter-hegemonic mode of Indigenous forensic and evidentiary practice. Thus, to read this project as a mode of futurist forensics is to understand how *Culture Capture* returns us to the animistic and cosmological basis of an Indigenous mode of forensics that, as Pugliese suggests, has been effaced within its modern Western criminalistic and scientific modalities. What this rereading also does is to expand the scope of the forensic as a mode of investigative cultural praxis. The forensic cannot be limited to narrow Western scientific epistemologies. It must be expanded, reexamining which publics, communities, and aesthetic-political practices can be included in its scope. The work of this paper has been to expand the boundaries of the forensic through a

refocusing on the crucial role of Indigenous animism and cosmo-epistemological thought.

In her powerful critique of the emerging counter-forensic turn in visual media culture, Nishat Awan has suggested that we need to find new modes of "counter-navigation that allow other ways of moving through what are increasingly ubiquitous and all-encompassing worlds."[64] The mode of futurist forensic practice that I have argued is present within the work of the NRO arguably functions as such a mode of "counter-navigation," opening up alternative and decolonial evidentiary modes of praxis that work against the "economy of legibility" that undergirds emergent media forensic epistemologies. In this article, I have aimed to articulate how the work of the NRO looks forwards and backwards simultaneously. The group looks backwards to excavate the deep entanglements between the forensic, evidentiary, and modes of Indigenous cosmo-epistemological thought. I have argued that the group's *Culture Capture* project aims to resuscitate the Indigenously-informed animistic core of the forensic. Here, forensic's "disavowed animism" is rejuvenated and recentered as a radical mode of praxis to resist the violent realities of contemporary settler colonialism and imagine alternative modes of evidentiary and documentary practice. Thus, to examine *Culture Capture* as part of a widened conceptualization of the forensic is not only to acknowledge the power of a poetics within the forensic—able to forge material connections between diverse manifestations of settler-colonial power structures in ways that are speculative and iterative—it's also simultaneously to emphasize the need for a "forensics of multiplicity," reexamining how diverse experimental fora can offer new, *speculative* and *counter-hegemonic* forms of resistance that move beyond the conservative and techno-scientific origins of the forensic.

As I've suggested previously, such a mode of counter-hegemonic practice dovetails with other recent counter-epistemologies of the evidentiary: Lee's formulation of "documentary unreality," de Castro and Pugliese's work on "cosmo-

epistemologies," and Ward's interventions around the concept of "Black evidence." Across these conceptual frameworks, there is a shared emphasis on how regimes of the forensic and evidentiary have historically been "tasked with filtering, indexing, and often *annihilating* subaltern lifeworlds."[65] Simultaneously however, these alternative, subversive, and counter-hegemonic approaches to the evidentiary expose a set of powerful, speculative and future-oriented modes of counter-forensic practice. For Ward, such counter-epistemological readings of the forensic and evidentiary can productively induce "anxieties and conceptual collisions when encountering terms like truth and objectivity."[66] When the ontological frameworks of truth and objectivity are always indelibly linked to the forensic and evidentiary's racist, colonial, and punitive pasts, it is crucial that modes of counter-practice break away from their visual and discursive groundings. Thus, by taking up the forensic and evidentiary, but reimagining them in speculative, counter-hegemonic ways, these frameworks can begin to be decoupled from their violent, settler-colonial origins.

Notes

1. For example, see Patrick Brian Smith and Ryan Watson, "Mediated Forensics and Militant Evidence: Rethinking the Camera as Weapon," *Media, Culture & Society* 45, no. 1 (2023): 36–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221088954 < https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221088954> ; Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (MIT Press, 2020); Kelly Gates, "Media Evidence and Forensic Journalism," *Surveillance & Society* 18, no. 3 (2020): 403–8, https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v18i3.14090 < https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v18i3.14090> ; and Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (MIT Press, 2017). ↩

2. For example, see Thomas Keenan, "Counter-Forensics and Photography," *Grey Room* 55 (2014): 58–77, https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY_a_00141 < https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY_a_00141> ; Bea Abbott and Nick Lally, "Counter-Forensics and the Geographies of Images," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2024): https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758241274646 < https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758241274646> ; and Jakob Hauter, "Forensic Conflict Studies: Making Sense of War in the Social Media Age," *Media, War & Conflict* 16, no. 2 (2023): 153–72, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211037325 < https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211037325> . ↩

3. As Joseph Pugliese highlights, "Western forensic science was born in the charged context of empire, race, and colonialism," *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence* (Duke University Press Books, 2020), 33. Contemporary understandings of the forensic and evidentiary are still structured around such violent hegemonic histories, particularly in contemporary legal punitive frameworks. My deployment of the counter-hegemonic here serves to highlight Indigenous epistemologies of the forensic that exist as a counterpoint to such Western hegemonic understandings, providing a radically alternative approach to evidence production and investigation. ↩

4. Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human*. ↩

5. Patrick Brian Smith and Ryan Watson, "Mediated forensics and militant evidence: rethinking the camera as weapon," *Media, Culture & Society*, 45, no. 1 (2023): 36–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221088954 < https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221088954> ; Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (Verso, 2021), 13. ↩

6. Allan Sekula, "Photography and the Limits of National Identity," *Grey Room* 55 (2014): 28–33, https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY_a_00143 < https://doi.org/10.1162/GREY_a_00143> . ↩

7. Keenan, "Counter-forensics and Photography," 69. ↩

8. Keenan, "Counter-forensics and Photography," 71. ↩

9. Patrick Brian Smith, "Elemental Documentary: Fire, Forensics and Pyro-Epistemologies," *Studies in World Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2023): 61–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/26659891-bja10025 < https://doi.org/10.1163/26659891-bja10025> . ↩

10. "About," Monument Lab, accessed January 7, 2025, https://monumentlab.com/about < https://monumentlab.com/about> . ↩

11. "National Monument Audit," Monument Lab, accessed January 7, 2025, https://monumentlab.com/audit < https://monumentlab.com/audit> . ↩

12. "National Monument Audit." ↩

13. "National Monument Audit." ↩

14. "National Monument Audit." ↩

15. Jeffrey C. Stone, "Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13, no. 1 (1988), pp. 57–64 ↩

16. Nishat Awan, "Digital Witnessing and the Erasure of the Racialized Subject," *Journal of Visual Culture* 20, no. 3 (2021): 507, https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129211061182 < https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129211061182> . ↩

17. Awan, “Digital Witnessing,” 507. ↩

18. Awan, “Digital Witnessing,” 512. ↩

19. Whilst the audit did inform the Mellon Foundation’s broader Monuments Project—a $250 million investment aimed at transforming how American “histories are told in public spaces and ensur{ing} that future generations inherit a commemorative landscape that venerates and reflects the vast, rich complexity of the American story”—such a community-based focus wasn’t built into the conception of the initial audit or interface (“National Monument Audit,” Monument Lab). Ultimately, the audit’s methodology relies heavily on data analysis and metadata parsing and the degree to which it engaged with local communities, historians, or cultural groups during its research phase is not evident. ↩

20. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 2020. ↩

21. James Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn* (Routledge, 2019), 10. ↩

22. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (MIT Press, 2017), 17. ↩

23. Giampaolo Bianconi, Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, and Jackson Polys, “New Red Order,” *Artforum*, October 8, 2020, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/new-red-order-on-channeling-complicity-toward-indigenous-futures-84189 < https://www.artforum.com/interviews/new-red-order-on-channeling-complicity-toward-indigenous-futures-84189> . ↩

24. Adam and Zack Khalil grew up in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan. Both graduated from the Film and Electronic Arts program at Bard College and are currently based in Brooklyn, New York. The brothers have a long standing collaborative documentary practice, producing a range of short and feature length works that aim to critique the settler-colonial foundations of the documentary form through irony, humor, and institutional critique. Jackson Polys grew up in Ketchikan, Alaska. He received his BA in Art History and Visual Arts from Columbia University (2013), and holds an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University (2015), he currently works between Alaska and New York. Working primarily across film and carved sculpture, his practice explores the history, historiography, and contemporary experience of native peoples. ↩

25. Timur Si-Qin, Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, and Jackson Polys, “Interview with New Red Order,” *Living Content*, November 25, 2021, https://www.livingcontent.online/interviews/new-red-order < https://www.livingcontent.online/interviews/new-red-order> . ↩

26. Sin-Qin et al., “Interview,” 2021. ↩

27. Adam Khalil, “UVP Insights: The New Red Order on Culture Capture: Terminal Addition,” November 9, 2020, https://vimeo.com/477322168 < https://vimeo.com/477322168> . ↩

28. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 5. ↩

29. This results in a widespread state of uncertainty, where there is a paradoxical interplay between hiding and exposing information. In this context, the revealed "secret" is not truly concealed, as it is a public secret. The apparent secrecy is more of a deliberate deception, which, according to Taussig, is the foundation of a society's power. Paraphrased from Kenneth Surin, "The Sovereign Individual and Michael Taussig's Politics of Defacement," *Nepantla: Views from South* 2, no. 1 (2001): 206, muse.jhu.edu/article/23914 < https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23914> . ↩

30. Bianconi et al., "New Red Order." ↩

31. Khalil, "UVP Insights," my emphasis. ↩

32. Khalil, "UVP Insights." ↩

33. Khalil, "UVP Insights." ↩

34. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*. ↩

35. We will return to Pugliese's work on Indigenous animism and forensics in the latter part of this paper, reflecting upon the interconnections between such epistemologies and the counter-hegemonic forensic strategies developed by the NRO. ↩

36. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*. For other work in this area, see Gagan Preet Singh, "The Strange Science: Tracking and Detection in the Late Nineteenth-Century Punjab," in *Global Forensic Cultures: Making Fact and Justice in the Modern Era*, ed. Ian Burney and Christopher Hamlin (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 279–304, which explores the historical development of intricate and complex forensic footprint tracking by Indigenous Punjabis; Laurelyn Whitt, *Science, Colonialism, and Indigenous Peoples: The Cultural Politics of Law and Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), which examines how the scientific epistemologies of Indigenous peoples globally have been extracted through historical and contemporary processes of biocolonialism; and Michael Bennett, *Pathfinders: A History of Aboriginal Trackers in NSW* (NewSouth, 2020), which focuses on histories of Indigenous Aboriginal tracking methods. ↩

37. Noah Caspar, "New Red Order – Crimes Against Reality," {*art*}*seen*, January 2, 2021, https://artsatmichigan.umich.edu/seen/2021/01/02/review-new-red-order-crimes-against-reality/ < https://artsatmichigan.umich.edu/seen/2021/01/02/review-new-red-order-crimes-against-reality/> . ↩

38. Toby Lee, "The Radical Unreal: Fabulation and Fantasy in Speculative Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2021): 9–18, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.74.4.9 < https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.74.4.9> ; and LaCharles Ward, "Somebody's – Or Nothing: Visual Evidence, Blackness and the Limits of Legal Seeing," *History of Photography* 45, no. 3–4 (2021): 375, https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2022.2138166 < https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2022.2138166> . ↩

39. Lee, “Radical Unreal.” ↩

40. Ward, “Somebody’s,” 375. ↩

41. It is important to note that whilst drawing upon—and engaging with—Indigenous theories and cultural practices, I acknowledge my own positionality as a non-Indigenous subject. Here, I take up Joseph Pugliese’s important assertion that I must “respectfully mark the ethical and embodied circumscriptions that preclude me from the locus of Indigenous-Place Thought and its lived and generative matrix of stories, laws, and songs” (Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 27). ↩

42. Andrew Gumbel, “Junípero Serra’s Brutal Story in Spotlight as Pope Prepares for Canonisation,” *Guardian*, September 23, 2015, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/23/pope-francis-junipero-serra-sainthood-washington-california < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/23/pope-francis-junipero-serra-sainthood-washington-california> . ↩

43. Indeed, as Adam Khalil has suggested, Fraser “was obsessed with Indians, he grew up in the prairies and had fond memories of playing with Lakota while his father was building railroads; expanding manifest destiny westward” (Adam Khalil, email to author, 2023). ↩

44. As I examined at the outset of the paper, the NRO’s name is a reference to the IORM, an organization that was historically marked by a desire to simultaneously “eliminate the savage, but also to become the savage” (Sin-Qin et al., “Interview,” 2021). This push and pull between settler-colonial desires for assimilation and destruction is a recurring theme that the NRO explore throughout their multimedia practice, particularly in video works such as *What Is Savage Philosophy? (Rhetorical Questions)*, 2018; *Never Settle: Calling In*, 2020; and *Never Settle: The Program*, 2018. ↩

45. In 2015, Fletcher appeared in an experimental adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Troilus and Cressida,” where he “dressed Indian.” The NRO, rather than denouncing Fletcher, invited him for dinner and recruited him. The NRO wanted Fletcher, and other non-Indigenous accomplices, to function as Indigenous “proxies.” As Jackson Polys suggests, “there’s a tension between doing that and occluding or minimizing actual indigenous voices. But . . . we’re trying to get away from the dynamic of people having to put in the labor of reproducing their own indigeneity.” Thus, “accomplices” like Fletcher take on this work by “playing Indian.” Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, and Jackson Polys, “The Film Comment Podcast: New Red Order,” accessed August 1, 2022, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/the-film-comment-podcast-new-red-order < https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/the-film-comment-podcast-new-red-order/> . ↩

46. Adam Khalil, “UVP Insights,” 2019 ↩

47. Khalil, “UVP Insights.” Moreover, when such acts of removal are enacted by white, non-Indigenous subjects, such acts might also constitute what Tuck and Yang have powerfully theorized as “settler moves to innocence.” For them, a settler move to innocence is defined as “those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the

settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all." Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 10, https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04 < https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04> .

48. Khalil, "UVP Insights."

49. Khalil, "UVP Insights."

50. The modes of "addition" and remodelling employed by the NRO can be nested within a longer lineage of Indigenous arts activism that has aimed to reshape settler-colonial modes of monumentalization and representation. Pan-Indigenous artists and activists have used a variety of aesthetic strategies (projected still and moving images and digital technologies, amongst others) to rework various settler-colonial regimes of monumentalization. For example, we can think here of the multimedia work of Cree artist Kent Monkman. Monkman's practice is concerned with reworking and queering nineteenth-century modes of settler-colonial visual mediation (from landscape painting to photographic portraiture). Here, the oppressive settler-colonial gaze is appropriated and subverted, both rupturing its coded conventions and reasserting Indigenous agency, histories, and futurities. The 2018 exhibition "Double Exposure" at the Seattle Art Museum is another example of such reframings and remodellings of the settler-colonial modes of visual mediation. Here, three Indigenous artists (Marianne Nicolson, a visual artist, scholar, activist and member of the Dzawada'enuxw First Nation of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations; Tracy Rector, a Choctaw/Seminole filmmaker, curator, and educator; and Will Wilson, a Diné cultural practitioner) subverted and reworked the (in)famous photographs of the white American artist Edward S. Curtis, where he documented the supposedly "vanishing" Native peoples of North America. The three artists, in ways comparable to the work of Monkman, take up this myth of "vanishing" to not only expose and disrupt such historical narratives, but also to reassert the resilience and strength of Indigenous peoples past and present. Thus, the NRO are part of a larger, intergenerational Indigenous movement that aims to morph and reshape settler representations of all kinds.

51. Patrick Harrison, "New Red Order," *Millennium Film Journal* 70 (2019): 49.

52. We might also read the economy of legibility that arguably structures the counter forensic through the lens of Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor's concept of "terminal creeds." For Vizenor, terminal creeds are "beliefs which seek to fix, to impose static definitions on the world," which simultaneously suppress the emergence of radical counter-hegemonic Indigenous epistemologies. Louis Owens, "Ecstatic Strategies: Gerald Vizenor's Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart," in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 144. It is arguable that the economies of legibility that structure the counter forensic similarly fashion static definitions and modes of visuality that draw us back to the narrow apertures of state-sanctioned forensics.

53. Christopher Green, "The New Red Order Promote Indigenous Futures," *Frieze*, 6 February 2020, https://www.frieze.com/article/new-red-order-promote-indigenous-futures < https://www.frieze.com/article/new-red-order-promote-indigenous-futures> .

54. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20.

55. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20; and Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Clear Light Publishers, 2016), 27.

56. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20; and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 56. It is important to note that de Castro's work on Indigenous animist thought is based primarily on his engagement with Indigenous communities in the Amazon. Of course, Indigenous communities are culturally diverse and do not have homogenous belief systems and ideologies. Whilst reading the relational dynamics of animistic thought across different Indigenous contexts runs the risk of "homogenising" or "essentialising" divergent Indigenous epistemologies (Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 17), it has been established that there are shared and intersecting understandings of the animistic across pan-Indigenous groups. Therefore, I contend that it is possible to read these diverse epistemological understandings of the animistic in a relational dialogue, whilst remaining attentive to their localized specificities and heterogeneities. For more on this see Amanda Kearney et al., "Conceptualising Indigenous Law," in *Indigenous Law and the Politics of Kincentricity and Orality*, ed. Amanda Kearney (Springer International Publishing, 2023), 1–30; and Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

57. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 21.

58. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20.

59. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20.

60. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 20.

61. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 19.

62. Pugliese, *Biopolitics*, 8.

63. Caspar, "New Red Order," 2021.

64. Nishat Awan, "Digital Witnessing and the Erasure of the Racialized Subject," *Journal of Visual Culture* 20, no. 3 (2021): 512, https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129211061182 < https://doi.org/10.1177/14704129211061182> .

65. Sasha Crawford-Holland and Patrick Brian Smith, "Forensics," in *The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies*, edited by Darren Wershler, Lori Emerson, and Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), https://manifold.umn.edu/read/a-glossary-of-lab-techniques-forensics/section/82b1f086-12fd-4f06-9e3c-cb6bea329291 <

https://manifold.umn.edu/read/a-glossary-of-lab-techniques-forensics/section/82b1f086-12fd-4f06-9e3c-cb6bea329291> .

66. Ward, “Somebody’s,” 374.

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Practical Strategies of Disruption for Dismantling White Supremacy in Ontario's Education System

by Aida Al-Thayabeh | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT This article examines the Ontario education system's use of surface level practices intended to counter racism but that often fall short of creating authentic and sustainable change. Many schools across the province have focused their efforts on celebrating identity awareness days, weeks, and months, yet these initiatives largely reveal an apparent disconnect in understanding of the significant impact of white supremacy that is deeply embedded within the educational structural system. Stories from students, families, and community members reveal ongoing, often unintentional, acts of harm or violence against Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized students, demonstrating a deep-seated failure to address systemic racism. The article explores the presence of harmful ideologies of white supremacy frameworks that permeate every facet of the education system, including the curriculum, communication, disciplinary actions, assessment, and institutional traditions and practices. By examining these issues, the article offers strategies for disrupting these structures, in order to dismantle white supremacy from the education system to support and empower Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized students. By providing these practical examples rooted in a transnational solidarity lens, the article aims to empower educators to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy in the classroom and promote meaningful and long-lasting change.

KEYWORDS Canada, Ontario, activism, decolonial, education, white supremacy

Introduction

My identity, as an Indigenous Afro-Palestinian Muslim elementary school educator encompasses far more than words can capture. It represents my ancestral

heritage, historical legacy, and enduring essence of being, guiding my commitment to resisting ongoing colonial occupation and the erasure of Palestinians and Palestine from history. However, I acknowledge the challenges of discussing these issues, recognizing that my own identity is a product of both colonialism and resistance against it. As an immigrant-settler, I have an unwavering commitment and solidarity with oppressed and colonized communities globally. In her book *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Angela Y. Davis captures the essence of solidarity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various movements, underscoring the necessity of mutual support in our collective struggle against oppression and apartheid.[1]

By embracing my intersectional identity and lived experiences of myself, family, and ancestors, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding racism, discrimination, and oppression. This article is a modest contribution to the broader movement against structures of white supremacy, rooted in my experiences, knowledge, and education. Through my stories and insights, I hope to plant seeds of resistance and hope, fostering a legacy free from racism, discrimination, and oppression in our education system.

This article draws upon principles from cultural studies to examine colonial legacies, power dynamics, and surface level efforts that persist in Canadian educational institutions, particularly in the province of Ontario. A cultural studies approach provides a critical framework for understanding how systemic structures, rooted in colonial ideologies, continue to shape the educational experiences of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities.[2] It allows us to interrogate not only how educational institutions construct and represent identity but also how they often inadvertently and advertently reinforce the very power hierarchies they claim to challenge. By focusing on how power operates in the classroom and the school system, this article critiques symbolic gestures toward equity and calls for deeper, transformative changes in language,

practice, and policy. It advocates for cross-cultural and transnational solidarity to disrupt and dismantle a white supremacy embedded within educational institutions.

Through these critiques, this article aims to supports educators engaging in anti-racism work both personally and professionally. It encourages educators to reflect on and unlearn colonial narratives that have been passed down through generations. However, this process requires confronting discomfort, particularly for educators who may have previously believed that equity efforts were sufficient but are not recognizing the limitations of these approaches.[3] Discomfort in this context does not refer to a general feeling of unease but rather the productive tension that arises when one is forced to critically examine long-held assumptions, recognize complicity in oppressive systems, and take meaningful steps toward justice.[4] Without this understanding and commitment, failing to dismantle these structures will only perpetuate further harm and trauma for future generations of students. Strategies for dismantling structures of white supremacy in educational systems must evolve alongside our understanding of systemic oppression. This article offers one steppingstone in the ongoing process of disrupting and dismantling colonial frameworks, recognizing that meaningful change requires a sustained and ever-changing to justice.

Disrupting and Dismantling the Classroom

This article intentionally uses the terms “disrupting and dismantling” the classroom rather than “decolonizing” because *true* “decolonization” cannot exist or function with the current education system. In recent years, “decolonizing the classroom” has become a catchphrase used by school boards to acknowledge systemic issues in the education system without enacting substantive change. In “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, critique this trend, noting how “decolonization methods,” or “decolonize student thinking” with

little to "no mention of Indigenous peoples, our/their struggles for the recognition of our/their sovereignty, or the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonization."[5] Tuck and Yang emphasize that when decolonization is used as a metaphor, "it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recentres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future."[6] Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino further argue that decolonization "requires the return of land and the reconstitution of Indigenous geographies," as decolonization is a "project of elimination."[7] Anishinaabe scholar Sheila Cote-Meek adds that the education system is also set up to teach Indigenous students from only a Eurocentric point of view, often disregarding cultural, community, or spiritual knowledge.[8] Similarly, Marie Battiste of the Potlotek First Nation critiques this systemic erasure, writing in *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*:

> Critical education and anti-oppressive education begin with the unpacking of Eurocentric assumptions of education, the normalized discourses and discursive practices that bestow ignorance on students, while it bestows layers of meaningless knowledge on to youth that hide the social and economic structures of Eurocentrism, white dominance, and racism.[9]

Battiste calls on educators to unlearn the dominant Eurocentric narratives and engage with Indigenous systems. She contrasts Eurocentric education with Indigenous frameworks, explaining that:

> Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modeling, practice, and animation, rather than through the written word. Indigenous knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library.[10]

The goal of this article is to provide strategies for disrupting and dismantling colonial educational structures, rather than proposing a metaphorical

decolonization that leaves settler-colonial frameworks intact. To truly decolonize a classroom would require the removing the physical “factory” building (the school); eliminating quality checks (standardized testing); and dismantling of the date-of-product (age-based cohorts), the assembly line of labor and conduct (school work, bells, straight-line formations, desk arrangements, rigid schedules, lunch breaks, hidden and explicit codes of conduct, dress codes), and the carceral system of punishment for students who do not conform to “factory” standard.[11]

Thus, while true decolonization remains unrealistic under current conditions, the goal is to one day create an entirely new and decolonized education system that fundamentally restructures all school systems.

Brief Background on the Canadian Education System

The Canadian education system is deeply entrenched in the colonial legacy of the “divide-in-difference” principle. This concept refers to how colonial structures manipulate differences among racialized and marginalized groups to main to white supremacy. Modeled after the eighteenth-century Prussian factory system, Canada’s schooling system was originally designed to create “docile subjects and factory workers.”[12] This is especially evident in the work of Egerton Ryerson, who in 1844 became the first chief superintendent of education in Upper Canada and also the pioneer architect of Indigenous (officially called Indian) Residential Schools (IRS) in Canada.[13] These “schools” played a pivotal role in enforcing cultural genocide by assimilating Indigenous peoples and communities.[14]

Notably, Canada’s education system is not federally governed; it is provincially managed, meaning changes happen on a provincial and/or board (regional) level. This is an important distinction, especially for readers unfamiliar with Canadian governance, as much of the discourse on decolonization must navigate a complex

landscape of provincial and regional policies and procedures. In Ontario, renaming schools is one of the most visible ways institutions are beginning to acknowledge their colonial past. Several institutions have renamed themselves in light of these violent histories, such as Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly called Ryerson University), Laurel Heights Secondary School in Waterloo (formerly called Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School), and Hillside Public School in Kitchener (formerly called A.R. Kaufman Public School), just to name a few.[15] However, renaming, while symbolically important, is not enough. It must be seen as a first step in a broader process of disrupting systemic racism embedded in education.

In many cases, efforts to address racism, oppression, and violence in the Ontario school system become mere "band-aid" solutions, which, while well-meaning, fail to address the systemic roots of white supremacy and colonialism. These efforts are often surface level, divisive, and in some cases, perpetuate the very harm they claim to address. Activist, academic, and educator, Amanda Buffalo of the Yukon First Nations describes several instances of the band-aid approach when teaching Indigenous studies or topics: visiting museums to see "how Indigenous peoples used to live" (as though Indigenous communities no longer exist) or engaging with Indigenous cartoons that reinforce racist and colonial stereotypes.[16] A related concept is the "add and stir" model, coined by Battiste, which describes the manufactured and superficial standards of teaching the realities of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities through an approach that embodies a lack of critical thought and uses inauthentic resources. This leaves the system fragmented and unable to educate about the realities of colonialism.[17] For example, colonialism is often framed as a historical narrative, which Battiste argues is intentionally taught to avoid "delving deeper into Indigenous knowledge."[18] This "add and stir" model is also seen in initiatives such as affinity groups (i.e., Muslim or Asian groups) and days of significance (i.e., Orange Shirt Day), which, while necessary and important, often fail to connect back to the systemic roots of racism and oppression.

Opportunities like affinity groups and days of significance are designed to celebrate identities, resist racism, and build relationships, which are important and necessary. However, at times these groups operate in isolation, unintentionally perpetuating the colonial "divide-in-difference" structures. As Audre Lorde argues, that the colonial practice of separation among racialized and marginalized groups is purposefully done to prevent solidarity and collective resistance.[19] Members of these groups often come from a range of intersectional identities, social locations, and lived experiences, complicating the assumption that their struggles are homogenous. For example, anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia are often treated as separate from anti-Indigeneity and anti-Black racism, despite all being rooted in the same colonial structures. These divisions serve to maintain white supremacy and colonialism by preventing racialized and marginalized groups from addressing the core issue of the enduring presence of colonial power structures.

As Angela Y. Davis argues, "transnational solidarity" is essential to dismantling white supremacy frameworks, as it unites movements and peoples against systemic oppression.[20] Similarly, Franz Fanon discusses how the colonized and oppressed must work together to resist colonial structures and the impact of internal colonization.[21] Rather than working in isolation, affinity groups should collaborate to build coalitions, recognizing the shared experiences of racism and oppression. Solidarity between affinity groups is necessary to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy.

Like affinity groups, days of significance, such as Orange Shirt Day, Islamic Heritage Month, and Black History/Brilliance Month, are intended to spotlight a specific racialized or marginalized group or community on a certain day, week, or month of the year, with the intention of raising awareness and celebrating student and community identities. However, these days often become symbolic engagements, disconnected from their original purpose of challenging white supremacy and colonialism. Battiste argues that these "add and stir" efforts are

designed as *distractions,* allowing schools to avoid engaging in the systemic changes necessary to address the root causes of oppression.[22]

For instance, Orange Shirt Day, which is meant to honour the children who were forcibly removed from their families and sent to residential "schools" has, in some cases, been transformed into a day of celebration rather than a somber day of respect for lost lives, a commemoration of survivors, and a recognition of the ongoing impact on Indigenous peoples and communities.[23] This example illustrates the lack of awareness in understanding the significant symbolism the orange shirt and its connection to white supremacy, colonialism, and genocide. While "somber" is not the only way to acknowledge these impacts, the orange shirt is a symbol of power dynamics, hierarchy, oppression, and racism that underpin colonialism.

Ultimately, disrupting and dismantling education requires moving beyond surface level gestures toward systemic and sustained transformation. Understanding how white supremacy and colonial structures, like the "divide-in-difference" principle, continue to shape current education practices and policies is important in dismantling white supremacy. This work requires cross-cultural and transnational solidarity, critical engagement, and a commitment to meaningful structural change in practice and policies, rather than superficial or tokenism representation.

Recommendations for the Classroom

As educators, where do we begin in the process of disrupting and dismantling oppression? One must first become comfortable with the discomfort of resisting the norms of white supremacy. White supremacy is a social construct based on racist ideologies that are embedded into every facet of the education system. Thus, changing how we speak, teach, assess students, and communicate with

their families and communities are starting points in the dismantling process. The following recommendations are meant for K–12 educators, however, in many cases, the suggestions can be adapted to the post-secondary level, as they primarily aim to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy in the classroom and foster inclusive spaces.

It is important to recognize that using these practices may look different depending on a teacher's social location, identity, and experiences. A teacher's race, gender, and cultural background can influence how students perceive these strategies. For example, a racialized educator may encounter different biases when challenging traditional dress codes or when using first names. Challenging such entrenched "rules" or traditions may have differing effects based on whether the educator is male, female, non-binary, Black, Indigenous, or white. Teachers should consider their identities and social location when implementing these recommendations.

1. Building Classroom Community

During the first days of school, educators should emphasize that this is *our* classroom and not *my* or *your* classroom. Allow students the space and opportunity to create their community (i.e., structure, flow, etc.). This shift in language accomplishes several things:

- It allows students to be accountable and responsible for their learning and social experiences.
- It allows students to have agency over what they learn and how they are going to learn it.
- It creates a collectivist mentality, which is counter to the individualistic ways of learning, by teaching students that we are all here to support one another.

2. Getting Rid of the Rigid Formalities

No Hands

Allowing students to ask and answer questions freely without raising hands, encourages spontaneity. The “no hands” rule also removes the fear or stigma students might feel when asking a question. By removing the invisible barriers, students will feel confident and empowered to ask questions at any time.[24] However, it is essential to consider how this approach may impact Indigenous, Black, racialized students or other marginalized groups. Thus, clear guidelines of respectful listening and speaking must be established first before establishing in a classroom. By doing so, this creates an environment where all students will feel empowered to speak up, even the quieter students. Over time, and patience and guidance, students will eventually unlearn the colonial idea of only speaking when addressed, while respecting each other’s voices.

No Policing of Clothing

Policing students’ clothing is deeply embedded in racist, colonial structures. Many school dress codes enforce rules rooted in Eurocentric standards of “respect” and “appropriateness” that often disregard cultural diversity. For instance, the rule requiring students to remove hats indoors, or during the national anthem, stems from Eurocentric traditions rooted in Christianity, dating back to the 1600s.[25] Originally, the “no hat” rule was implemented as another method of control, reinforcing hierarchical authority in schools and discouraging student autonomy. This approach of enforcing “respect” is not neutral, as it embodies a white, Eurocentric viewpoint that excludes other cultural interpretations of respect and identity.[26]

Beyond hats, rules against head wraps, durags, bandanas, or hoodies continue this pattern, failing to account for the diverse cultural expressions present in

today's classrooms.[27] For example, dress codes have historically targeted Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized students disproportionately, often labeling their clothing or hair choices as "inappropriate" or "distracting." In March 2022, a female student from Wood Street Centre school in Whitehorse, Yukon was told she had been "dress-coded" by teachers and her clothing was too revealing and she needed to change.[28] In 2017, two Black sisters, both teens, were asked to leave their Mystic Valley Regional Charter school in Boston, United States, because their hair extensions were deemed "distracting"; they were issued "infractions" for violating the school dress code.[29] In March 2023, several middle school students at Park West school, Halifax, were sent to the office and asked to remove their keffiyeh (Palestinian scarf), citing the scarf was a "sign of war."[30] Such incidents highlight the cultural bias inherent in dress codes, which often disproportionately impact Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and marginalized students regulating their cultural expressions and enforcing assimilation into white, Eurocentric norms.

Furthermore, dress codes infringe upon students' agency and autonomy over their bodies, limiting their right to self-expression. Policing clothing reinforces the colonial legacy of controlling marginalized groups' appearance and autonomy. Teachers must critically examine and challenge these dress code norms to foster inclusive spaces that celebrate student identity, promote self-empowerment, and address the harmful impacts of racist colonial practices.

No Rows

The concept of classroom rows is based on the factory model of education. At the turn of the twentieth century, classrooms were set up for "product" efficiency, where educators lectured from the front of the class while students sat in fixed desks.[31] Research shows that arranging desks in a circle or other collaborative configurations, rather than traditional rows, promotes classroom community building and is a "key factor in improving student learning."[32] Furthermore,

educators can remove their desks completely from the classroom, to dismantle symbols of hierarchy and illustrate that educators are equal in the process of knowledge sharing.

Use first names

In many Eurocentric educational contexts, it is traditionally considered disrespectful for students to address educators by their first name. This practice reinforces power dynamics and hierarchical structures that position educators as authority figures and students as passive recipients of knowledge. However, educational psychology suggests that breaking down such formalities can shift the classroom environment. Reducing hierarchies in the classroom fosters a collaborative space where students feel empowered and take ownership of their work.[33] Using first names is a way to challenge hierarchy, positioning educators as co-learners rather than gatekeepers of knowledge. Paolo Freire advocates for a liberation education that sets one free, where both teacher and student participate actively in the learning process.[34]

3. Practicing and Integrating Oral Traditions of Knowledge

Many Indigenous cultures have some form of oral traditions of passing along knowledge, traditions, and other elements of culture.[35] There are many ways educators can embed oral traditions into their classrooms, including in knowledge, content, curriculum, and assessment. Two examples include:

- Integrating community circles into the classroom routine.
- Affording students the opportunity to create oral presentations in lieu of writing essays. Oral presentations can be in the form of storytelling, mini-conferences, debating, town hall meetings, large and small group discussions, poetry slams, or open-mic sessions.

Using oral traditions integrates culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and supports classroom diversity by integrating global Indigenous community practices. Embedding oral traditions can support student well-being and their communities and foster a classroom rooted in celebrating their identities, traditions, and ways of knowing.[36]

4. Removal of Traditional Notions of Success

Who defines success? What standards are being upheld to maintain this idea of success? As educators, when thinking of success, be mindful of positionality, social location, explicit and implicit biases, stereotypes, and societal structures rooted in capitalism and white supremacy. Consider the implications of embedded notions of what traditional success has on ongoing suffering and oppression of students. Matthew Knoester and Wayne Au argue that covert forms of racism are found in concepts such as meritocracy or notions of success, where educators are made to believe "that success is purely the result of individual hard work and not the function of social, historical, or institutional processes."[37] The concept of meritocracy oversimplifies and does not engage with the macro- and micro-inequities that significantly impact Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized students. Thus, students and educators should decide together what success will look, sound, and feel like. Here are a few examples of how success can be redefined in the classroom:

- Providing students with open-ended questions to allow all students to feel successful.
- Encouraging students to use their books during assessments, providing them the opportunity to turn-and-talk during evaluations, or providing questions in advance for evaluations.
- Doing away with grade-based assessments to instead focus on feedback and effort-based grading.
- Promoting self-assessment and peer assessment.
- Providing students with choice and voice in alternative assessment strategies, such as blog or letter writing, oral reports, debates, visual art, drama, music,

spoken word, poetry, and open mic events.[38]

5. Teach Beyond the Formal and "Hidden" Curriculum

Historically, the education system in Canada has reflected colonial perspectives, emphasized white Eurocentric narratives, and whitewashed or omitted the contributions of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities. Despite recent efforts made by the Ministry of Education in Ontario to address some of these concerns, the reality is that much of the public education in Ontario still remains outdated and embedded with colonial narratives.[39] Looking specifically at the Ontario social studies curriculum for grades 1 to 8, Indigenous peoples are juxtaposed against the settler colonial imaginary of a peaceful nation building context.[40] At the secondary level (high school), students are not required to take history until grade 10, and when they do have a history class, Indigenous peoples are represented from a deficit lens and a settler colonial perspective.[41] Marie Battiste discusses the purposeful whitewashing of history that aims to avoid delving deeper into issues of violence, trauma, and genocide in nation building.[42]

In addition to the formal curriculum, arguably more destructive is the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to the socialization of students by unconscious and conscious values brought into schools, which can include "social relationships, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, all of which feed processes of exclusion of people of colour."[43] Due to the hidden curriculum, Black and Indigenous students have higher suspension and expulsion rates and are more likely to be streamed into non-academic vocational and technical programs.[44]

In Ontario, the elimination of student streaming in 1999 was an attempt to address concerns of discrimination and inequity associated with the practice. Under the revised system, students in Ontario have the option to choose between academic and applied courses in various subjects offered at the secondary level, including English, sciences, mathematics, geography, history, and French. Academic

courses generally focus on higher-level academic thinking, while applied courses take a more practical approach to education.[45] The intention behind this choice-based system may have been to offer students more flexibility and cater to different learning styles and interests. However, disparities still persist in the current Ontario public school system that raise concerns about equity in the distribution of students across academic and applied courses. Certain groups, including those with lower parental education, lower income, and especially Indigenous and Black students, and some racialized groups such as newcomers or Multi-Language Learners (MLLs), are more likely to be enrolled in applied courses.

In 2015, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the fourth largest board in North America, reported that Black students had a graduation rate of 69% and Indigenous students had a 50% graduation rate, compared to 84% for white students.[46] Further, the TDSB reported that 53% of Black students and of 48% Indigenous students are more likely to be streamed into applied programs, compared to the 16% of white students who were enrolled in applied studies. In addition, the academic program was 81% white students.[47] Expulsion and policing rates were also disproportionately higher for Black, Indigenous, Eastern Mediterranean, Muslim, and Southwest Asian students in the TDSB primary and secondary schools. Black students only made up 12% of the TDSB student population but represented 48% of all expulsions; Indigenous students comprised 0.3% of the TDSB population with a 1% expulsion rate; and Eastern Mediterranean, Muslim, and Southwest Asian students were 4% of the student population but faced 8% of expulsions.[48] The concentration of specific characteristics among students in applied courses suggests that systemic factors influence educational trajectories that perpetuate inequalities and limit opportunities for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive, large-scale approach that includes examining factors such as curriculum changes, resources, and support

systems. It also involves small acts of targeted interventions and support by providing safe, caring, and inclusive environments for student's physical, emotional, and mental well-being. Thus, if an educator wishes to embrace transforming classrooms in a positive, culturally responsive way, then it is necessary to go beyond the curriculum to disrupt and dismantle embedded ideologies. Regardless of the subject, topic, or grade level, educators need to constantly be aware of and interrogate their social locations as well as their implicit and explicit biases. It is also important for educators to critically question the material provided to them. When teaching any subject, ask students questions to get them thinking critically: Where do they see gaps? Whose story is missing? Where do they see problematic or racist narratives? This knowledge and material can be presented through project-based learning (PBL) or the student-led model, which fosters deeper learning, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. For example, during science class, instead of memorizing facts and terms about ecosystems, students create a project. Here students would plan, research, execute, and evaluate the project of their choice from start to finish with limited teacher involvement or instructions. This hands-on approach to learning empowers students to become active participants in their learning and knowledge consumption, as well as promotes collaboration and problem-solving skills.[49]

6. Going Beyond the "Fluff"

For the purposes of this article, "fluff" refers to the surface level actions that give the appearance of addressing racism or discrimination but lack meaningful change. "Fluff" looks like providing readings or texts by non-white authors, displaying images of "diverse" individuals, or using media featuring people from various backgrounds without deeper engagement. While representation is important, focusing solely on these visible gestures can lead to tokenism rather than transformational change. True transformation requires a sustained

commitment to critically examining everything that shapes the classroom environment, including curriculum, assessment practices, disciplinary policies, and the power dynamics between educators and students. This means going beyond simply incorporating such materials, but engaging in deep critical conversations on white supremacy, colonialism, and systemic inequalities. To further add to this point, it is crucial to integrate multi-perspectives, as to avoid a "single story" or a homogenized narrative.[50]

For example, when discussing Indigenous peoples, it is essential to recognize that the term "Indigenous" is an umbrella term that encompasses a diverse array of cultures, knowledges, languages, beliefs, and peoples from Turtle Island (North America) and beyond. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states the term "Indigenous . . . appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different."[51] By understanding and conveying the diversity within Indigenous communities, educators can foster a more inclusive representation of Indigenous peoples, rather than reinforcing monolithic representations.

7. Celebrate Student Identity All Day . . . Everyday

When working to dismantle oppressive structures in the classroom, every action must *be intentional and purposeful*. An inclusive approach means acknowledging and celebrating student identities, whether through oral traditions, assignments, and daily conversations. When creating assignments, slideshows, exemplars, and assessments, or when showing videos, Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized students must be seen and reflected. Whether or not the student body is predominantly white, this practice needs to become normalized. Here are some examples of centering student identity:

- Oral Assessments: Offer multiple formats to allow students to demonstrate their learning, such as oral presentations, podcasts, spoken word, poetry slam, artistic representations, community-based projects, or in digital form.

- Cultural Connections: Encourage students to investigate the origin, history, and meaning behind their names, family members/history, ancestors, elders, and/or cultural backgrounds.
- Multi-Language Expression: Provide opportunities for Multi-Language Learners (MLLs) to write and present in their home language. Recognize and celebrate their identity in books, songs, or media.
- Proper Pronouns and Names: When possible (while considering student safety), using proper pronouns when interacting with students.[52] Be proactive, rather than reactive in allowing students to understand the importance of using proper pronouns and names, or the proper pronunciation of names.
- Student Voice: Create a space where class discussions, journal presenting, and class chats are student-led. Further, provide opportunities for students to become the "teacher" and teach their fellow peers about a topic.
- Stereotypes/Bias/Racism: Be **proactive**, rather than reactive when it comes to big topics with students. Have frequent conversations with students about the harm certain words or actions can perpetuate. Create an environment where students feel safe to address racism and discrimination.

Again, the idea is to keep student identity at the forefront of lesson planning and daily interactions. This can be done through daily conversations, projects, or presentations where students share stories that connect their identities and experiences. It is important to note that educators should avoid making assumptions of gender, culture, religion, or ethnicity, as to not perpetuate homogenization of their identity. That each student has a different story, social location, and intersectionality that will create a unique student identity in the classroom. These examples can serve as starting points to an ongoing process to create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers and centers students.[53]

Assessment and Evaluation

In the colonial education system, assessment and evaluation often uphold Eurocentric norms that prioritize product over process and maintain binary assumptions, such as right versus wrong or pass versus fail.[54] Ardavan Eizadirad

adds that assessment is based on "representing hegemonic norms and standards, effectively dictating what knowledge ought to be 'mastered' by specific ages according to Western developmentalist trajectories."[55] Not only is the evaluation of students affected by these dominant assessment paradigms, but also the training and evaluation of student teachers. Further, Sudhakar Venu describes,

> A glaring weakness of existing teacher education practices is the restricted scope of evaluation of student teachers and its excessively quantitative nature. It is confined to measurement of mainly cognitive learning through annual/terminal tests; skill measurement is limited to a specified number of lessons. The qualitative dimensions of teacher education, other professional capacities, attitudes, and values remain outside the purview of evaluation.[56]

Assessment is an ongoing process of "gathering evidence to determine what students know, understand and can do."[57] Further, it is important to recognize that the notion of "success" varies across cultural contexts and individual experiences, and that teachers' own identities and social locations affect how they interpret and enact assessments.

Disrupting assessment requires the need to unlearn, learn, and relearn new ways of assessing students. It is unfair and unethical to merely assess students on *what* they create or *how* well they perform on a test or quiz. Disrupting and dismantling assessment means focusing on the *process* with little or no emphasis on the product. Mastering the skill is far more essential and relevant to student knowledge and growth than creating an end product used to meet guidelines or reproduce structural harm.[58] Here are some examples of alternative forms of assessment:

- Allow for peer and self-assessment.
- Do away with grade-based assessment and focus on labour-based grading (process over product). Labour-based grading is an alternative form of grading or assessing students with a focus on completion of assignments and mastery

of learning outcomes, rather than letter grades based on individual assignments, quizzes, tests, or exams. Educators can co-create grading contracts or rubrics with students that detail specific criteria to ensure student success. This approach fosters a more holistic approach to assessment and values the process over the final product.[59]
- Embed oral traditions into all subjects (i.e., songs, dance, digital use, and storytelling).
- Emphasize formative assessment (i.e., one-on-one conferencing, spoken word, poetry, small/large group assessment, check-ins, debates, and town hall meetings).
- Provide as many opportunities as possible for cross-curricular connections, that is, have students create art in math or science in nature with Indigenous studies.
- Allow student choice and voice in how they want to be assessed.

Conclusion

In the words of renowned Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane, author of *Ambiguous Adventure*, "the cannon compels the body, the school bewitches the soul."[60] This quote embodies the profound impact of colonial education systems. Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Franz Fanon both argued that what was taught in schools and embedded into societies was far more powerful than the physical acts of colonization.[61] These institutions led the colonized to internalize their subjugation as a form of liberation. The Ontario education system, like many other education systems across the world, remains deeply rooted in the legacy of white supremacy and colonialism, continuing to perpetuate these harmful, and at times violent, ideologies. Both Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Franz Fanon believed that the colonization of the mind stands as the most powerful tool against the colonized, and they have demanded that efforts to dismantle oppression begin within educational institutions by shifting power dynamics that still shape the lived experiences of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized students.[62]

This article has sought to not only to expose oppressive frameworks within the Ontario school system but to also provide strategies for disrupting the colonial narratives that have persisted across generations. It encourages educators to engage in anti-racism work personally, professionally, and socially, extending their commitment beyond the school walls. The discomfort that accompanies this unlearning and dismantling of deeply embedded colonial narratives should be seen as a necessary catalyst for transformative change. Educators are asked to embrace this discomfort and to recognize that without actively disrupting and dismantling white supremacy systems, we risk perpetuating further harm, violence, and trauma for future generations of students.

By cultivating a transnational solidarity lens and integrating anti-racist, decolonial pedagogies, educators can begin to counter the "bewitching" effect that Cheikh Hamidou Kane describes as the most powerful weapon left behind by the colonizers.[63] Only by liberating the education system from its colonial roots can we create an environment where future students receive an education free from oppressive white supremacy ideologies. This work represents only the beginning, merely a stepping stone in the ongoing process of disrupting and dismantling racist structural systems, with the ultimate hope of "decolonizing" our educational institutions so that all students can thrive as their authentic selves.

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Surviving in Eugenic Times: Disabled Artists' Feelings about Their "Under-the-Table" Livelihoods

by Kimberlee Collins, Chelsea Temple Jones and Carla Rice |
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ABSTRACT Launching from recent interest in disabled people's livelihoods in the context of global Northern societies, this paper theorizes interview descriptions of livelihoods from 20 disabled, mad, and Deaf artists in Ontario, Canada. Drawing on a critical sustainable livelihoods framework, we observe that the lives of disabled artists play out in an ethos of neoliberal-ableism that has resulted in an accelerated impetus toward death for disabled people, specifically through the advancement of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). Interviews reveal themes of disposability, dignity, and art-as-resistance that are deeply entrenched in disabled artists' livelihood experiences and the complexities of their artistry and involvement in wider, contemporary disability arts communities. This paper responds to Stienstra and Lee's 2019 call in *Societies* to begin "widening our gaze in concrete terms" as we explore disabled people's livelihoods, contending that discussions of disabled artists' livelihoods must be situated in the social and material realities of their current contexts. We argue that the lived experiences of disabled people in Canada are also death experiences, and therefore a sustainable livelihoods approach to disabled artists' experiences must account for Canada's necropolitical realities.

KEYWORDS Canada, artists, disability, necropolitics

Introduction

Currently, in Canada, the lived experiences of disabled people are also death experiences. In 2023 a leading national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*,

published an opinion piece by psychologist Scott Kim pointing to "a uniquely MAiD ideology" which he characterized as an uptick in unsolicited suggestions for disabled people to choose Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). MAiD is a process whereby a doctor or a nurse practitioner assists a person, at their request, to end their life. Kim argued that the promotion of MAiD in Canada brands the choice to die as "care" rather than as a last resort, which is particularly dangerous for "those who desperately want to live but cannot afford to."[1] This discursive flip of violence into a gesture of care is the contested ground on which our research on the lives and livelihoods of artists with bodymind differences—that is, those identifying as sick, disabled, mad, Deaf, neurodivergent, crip, intellectually disabled, and a myriad of other self-identifiers—takes place. Although their work contributes to Canada's vibrant, political, and robust disability, Deaf, crip, and mad arts movement,[2] little is known about these artists' livelihoods—how they survive and thrive amidst neoliberalism's ableist neutralization of "care" structures available to end their lives. As part of a research project called "Artistry Under the Table: D/deaf and Disabled Artists' Livelihoods" (hereafter, Artistry Under the Table),[3] we combine critical disability studies and a sustainable livelihoods approach to follow Deborah Stienstra and Theresa Lee's livelihoods framework, and ask if a perspective that emerged from studies of development in the Global South can be applied to the lives of disabled people in the context of neoliberal capitalism in the Global North. Stienstra and Lee suggest that we begin by "widening our gaze in concrete terms" to better understand the lives and experiences of those whose livelihoods are deeply connected to crip artistry and backlit by active threats of new eugenics.[4] We respond to their call by mapping the "uniquely MAiD ideology" and necropolitical contexts that constitute disabled artists' affects of disposability and dignity, and their complex engagement with artistry-as-resistance.

"Artistry Under the Table" is one node of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant-funded project based at the University of Guelph focused on disabilities and livelihoods in Canada.

“Artistry Under the Table” has aimed to explore how disabled, Deaf, and mad artists use the arts to represent cultural and political stories, share experiences, engage with emotions, and challenge dominant narratives surrounding difference. Emerging from the burgeoning interest in crip arts and crip cultural practices—culturally engaged art and cultural practices that center disabled people’s reclamation of “crip” and their creative engagement with culture and access practices that resist assimilation into normative culture—our project sought to explore the challenges faced by disabled and crip artists in Canada.[5] When we say “under the table,” we mean how people engage in art and artistry in covert ways that sustain their livelihood by establishing resources needed for survival through a combination of institutionalized funding (e.g., arts grants, state funding) and other means (e.g., cash payments, time/space sharing, selling art, sex work, short-term “gigs,” “caregiving, bartering, hunting, trapping, or berry-picking,” etc.).[6] We interviewed 20 artists to learn more about their experiences of thriving and surviving under neoliberal capitalism.[7] The interviews, which took place between March 2020 and May 2020, revealed the ways in which government policies impact artists’ livelihoods and how art plays a significant role in sustaining life and thereby livelihoods.

A Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

“Artistry Under the Table” takes a sustainable livelihoods approach in its engagement with disabled artists’ lives. This approach is rooted in the study of livelihoods, which refer to things “people do in order to . . . sustain themselves . . . in ways that are sustainable by them,” with a commitment to focusing on non-market approaches to livelihoods.[8] In other words, a livelihoods approach encompasses the different actions individuals take to support themselves in sustainable ways that do not depend on market mechanisms, such as selling their art or commodifying their art practice. Disabled people in Canada have caught the attention of livelihoods researchers because disability and poverty are deeply

intertwined in this country;[9] the 1990s policy decisions by the federal government have resulted in decreased spending on disabled people that is also distributed by "a disjointed patchwork of programs."[10] Recommendations for policy reform often focus on disabled people's assimilation into the workforce.[11] However, emphasizing employment and employability follows a deeply individualistic logic that is contested by some disabled artists and activists, including Sunaura Taylor,[12] who explains:

> Much of the empowering rhetoric in disability movements is about becoming employed and about having equal access to mainstream society. Capitalism has at its root the idea of an individual's worth being intrinsically linked to their production value. Many, though by no means all, disabled people will never be good workers in the capitalist sense: if you cannot move or speak, it is hard to succeed in a mainstream career.

Attuned to preoccupations with development and poverty, a *sustainable* livelihoods framework de-centers the market as provider and accounts for non-material aspects of poverty.[13] As Stienstra and Lee explain, "underlying such an approach is a commitment to explore non-market-oriented approaches to living one's life."[14] This perspective challenges the assumption that income and consumption ought to be adequate measures of one's welfare (or value)[15] and understands assets to be both material and social.[16] By expanding the value of assets beyond the financial sphere to encompass the social, a sustainable livelihoods approach also recognizes the intangible.[17]

Intangible assets may be hidden, such as relationships to others and to land. Sustainable livelihoods research into artists' lives specifically reveals many hidden assets; and existing research also critiques the premise that art-based social enterprises "lift people out of poverty" in part because such strategies tend to be "imposed [on] rather than enacted" by local people.[18] For example, Donna Weston proposes a conception of musical livelihood that includes musician's "musical lifeworld[s]" that cannot be explained only in economic terms.[19]

Elsewhere, Frederik Unseld explores the interrelation between the struggle to survive and the artistic imaginary of one Kenya-based artist, uncovering both "the harsh, more grounded flipside to . . . aspirational efforts at cultural entrepreneurship," and how artistic identity can remain constant, vibrant, and flourishing while waiting for income-generating opportunities. They conclude that art-making is both part of, and apart from, the "hustle."[20]

A Sustainable Livelihoods Approach in Canada

The context for research about disabled artists' livelihoods in Canada is unique. Here, disability culture is under threat, asserts Rachel Gorman. Many people engaged in disability and crip art and culture making "are threatened by arts institutions and charitable organizations that seek to promote disability arts while dismissing its political base."[21] Indeed, as Robert McRuer notes, the term "crip" represents not only an identity but also a historical situation, with the phrase "crip times" denoting both austerity and a range of personal experiences and creative reactions.[22] In these crip times and recognizing the distortions that arise from using disability as a metaphor and cultural trend, crip artists advocate for reevaluating the neoliberal principles of the contemporary art world through a framework of care.[23] This is particularly urgent given that MAiD frames the choice to die as a form of "care," posing significant dangers for those who wish to live but lack the means to do so, and serving as the contested ground for our research on the lives and livelihoods of artists with bodymind differences. Building on this research, we recognize the merits of expanding concepts of assets to include the social and intangible, while we also query the potential pitfalls in a necropolitical economy of using the term "assets" as a marker of value in relation to intangibles such as art making practices. Our interviews with artists aimed to better understand how disabled, Deaf, and mad artists in Canada sustain themselves and their artistry both within and outside of market-oriented approaches in the Canadian context. Noting that sustainable livelihoods frameworks stem from

international development work (primarily in the Global South), Stephanie Baker Collins (2004) warns of the risk of decontextualization in using this approach in Canada.[24] Such decontextualization might occur if livelihood strategies focus solely on individual efforts to increase assets rather than attending to interactions, contexts, livelihoods outcomes, and, importantly, people's own interpretations of their reality.[25] With this warning in mind, we anchor the following analysis in the "uniquely MAID ideology" that Kim described by contextualizing participants' as those whose lives are characterized by the state as surplus, disposable populations. As a result, disabled artists' are navigating their livelihoods in ways designed by, and in resistance to, Canada's necropolitical ethos.[26] Below, we describe this necropolitical context beginning with an exploration of neoliberal-ableism[27] and its close relationship to the concept of "slow death."[28]

An Overview of Canada's Necro-Economy

The structural and systemic barriers and processes that impact disabled people's lives and livelihoods in Canada are arguably rooted in the dynamics of neoliberalism. Following Tanja Aho, a focus on sustainable livelihoods attends to the ways that "certain liberal tenets maintain their stranglehold on our conception of the good life" even amid calls for disability-related policy reform.[29] Stienstra and Lee surmise that a characteristic of neoliberalism is that "in order for disabled people to survive, let alone thrive, in neo-liberal circumstances they need to embrace ableism."[30] Ableism assigns differential value to bodyminds based, in part, on their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel," and "behave" according to metrics and standards developed to enrich markets and strengthen nations that are intertwined with eugenics, anti-Black racism, misogyny, settler colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.[31] Ableism is embedded in structures of governmentality that enforce productivity and competitiveness and debilitate those who cannot meet the demands of a neoliberal economy—a state of affairs that Dan Goodley, Rebecca Lawthom, and Katherine Runswick-Cole call

“neoliberal-ableism.”[32] It is neoliberal-ableism that evaluates life’s worthiness through “forensic” calculations, categorizing individuals based on differences and creating hierarchies within those categories. This approach informs resource allocation, using accounting methods to decide whose lives are deemed significant and how much they are worth.[33] Canada’s necro-economy takes shape in the context of neoliberal-ableism.

At its core, necropolitics is “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not.”[34] It is a framework that illuminates how governments assign differential value to human life. In this way, necropolitics shifts the focus from “make live” to “let live and make die,” where life is managed under neoliberal-ableism. Necropolitics abandons the idea of improving life (“make live”) in favour of allowing survival only for those with the means, such as wealth or power. Those without such resources are left to fend for themselves or, in many cases, are actively made to die under these systems.[35] In this way, necropolitics illuminates how state policies assign “differential value to human life” which we would argue is entangled with ableism.[36] For Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is carried out through three entwined factors: a necro-economy, death on a large scale, and confinement of certain populations.[37] Below, we describe how each of these factors is enacted for disabled people in Canada.

Neoliberal-Ableism and Slow Death in Canada

Canada’s necro-economy operates through a labor market that favours only those “who embody the normative capacities” privileged by neoliberalism.[38] Following Lauren Berlant, the eventual wearing away of bodyminds under neoliberal-ableism results in a process of “slow death” whereby some bodyminds are rendered disposable and permitted to wear down.[39] Henry Giroux describes this as a biopolitics of disposability, explaining that disposability can be evidenced by how “minorities of colour and class . . . are vanishing into a sinkhole of poverty.”[40] Canada’s confinement of disabled people in poverty, including through state-

regulated funding programs that are argued to reproduce rather than prevent poverty, is well documented.[41] An example relevant to our research with disabled artists is the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), a public "income replacement" program that complicates our understanding of "assets" in relation to livelihoods. Those eligible for ODSP receive a monthly payment for basic needs and shelter. While the amount a person can receive varies based on the program's assessment criteria, the most a single person can receive is $1,169 CAD per month, meaning that people who receive ODSP are living well below the poverty line.[42] Researchers have documented the many ways in which ODSP is inadequate, including the program's specific eligibility criteria that make people "vulnerable to poverty and its symptoms, such as food and housing insecurities."[43] In this way, ODSP troubles conventional understandings of assets as material, social, and intangible. Though ODSP represents the material asset of money, its proximal causation of poverty via state design calls into question its value as an asset. More than this, ODSP monitors recipients' attainment of other assets (e.g. income, grant dollars, monetary gifts), clawing back when recipients have more assets than the program allows. These conditions complicate the use of asset measurement to assess the livelihoods of disabled Ontarians.

Emerging from these conditions is the "death-world" necro-economy, wherein death on a large scale is introduced. The work of death on a large scale is, as Mbembe explains, entangled in state-sanctioned logics of disposability. Mbembe contends the,

> power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death. . . . This life is a superfluous one, therefore, whose price is so meager that it has no equivalence, whether market or—even less—human; this is a species of life whose value is extra-economic, the only equivalent of which is the sort of death able to be inflicted upon it.[44]

Mbembe's question of "who is disposable and who is not" transforms neoliberal-ableism and "slow death" into necropolitical issues.[45] The necro-economy centres on the elimination of populations and is employed through "small doses" of everyday violence, including limited access to the workforce and state-enforced poverty measures, with MAiD offered as the alternative.[46] Mbembe writes that "coercion itself has become a market commodity" and it is through this frame that necropolitics unfolds.[47] The extraction of productivity as a resource and the disposability of those positioned as "unproductive" create new "death-worlds" wherein populations "are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."[48] These state created "deathworlds" are where those deemed disposable, individuals who disproportionately consume healthcare resources or contribute to escalating healthcare costs, are left to a slow death.[49] The combination of neoliberal-ableism and slow death that characterizes the landscapes of disabled people's lives and livelihoods in Canada are deeply necropolitical.

Thanapolitics in Canada

The "death-worlds" that Mbembe describes can also be understood through the lens of biopolitics.[50] Some scholars assert that the term biopolitics originates in the work of Karl Binding and Edward Hahn,[51] while others gesture to the work of Hannah Arendt,[52] and still others trace its lineage through Michel Foucault.[53] Biopolitics represents an evolution of power toward the regulation and confinement of populations in the interest of making life "healthier . . . and purer."[54] Canada's population confinements have long enacted the emphasis on health and purity through a legacy of eugenics projects aimed at eliminating bodymind differences. Such projects include residential school systems targeting Indigenous children between the 1870s and 1990s, the institutionalization of disabled people,[55] and the sterilization of disabled and Indigenous people across Canada.[56] While these examples point to literal confinement, we note that

Mbembe's[57] criteria for necropolitics—that is, confinement of populations—can be transinstitutional, including through eugenic practices aimed at producing and privileging a non-disabled, white population.[58]

One of the realities of a necropolitical economy is that disabled people's lives unfold through newgenics—a concept that points to the legacies of eugenics which continue to shape disability activism, culture, and politics.[59] As a settler colonial intervention, eugenics is often associated with the past; however, as we document below, the long shadows of eugenics haunt current MAiD legislation and the lives of the artists featured here. One way of understanding the connection between newgenics, a range of modern medical, political, and social practices focused on 'enhancing' humanity while erasing disability and difference,[60] and the current livelihoods of disabled artists in Canada is through the intertwined concepts of thanatopolitics and necropolitics. Launching from biopolitics and aligned with necropolitics, Giorgio Agamben asserts that sovereign power determines who is allowed into the political body; the expansion of "bare life" marks the point at which biopolitics becomes thanatopolitics, or the politics of death.[61] Thanatopolitics refers to a way to "meaningfully subvert biopolitical logic through death," although not without contestation.[62] Both necropolitics and thanatopolitics focus on how governments use death to control populations, either directly or indirectly. However, while necropolitics imposes death, thanatopolitics is a subtle way of making death available; thanatopolitcal discourse makes death "accessible, and can present death as an option, as a right, as a legitimate goal, through the operations of discourse."[63] Judith Butler contends that biopolitics can be a politics of affirmation in that shared vulnerability can promote life because it contests and mourns all untimely and unjust death.[64] With these debates in mind, we shift our attention below to the ways in which eugenics are intertwined in evolving MAiD discourses and constitute the context in which disabled artists' livelihoods unfold.

“Widening Our Gaze” around MAiD

We take up Stienstra and Lee’s call to “widen our gaze in concrete terms” by attending to the shifting landscape of MAiD legislation in Canada and its evolving contours, which impact disabled people’s livelihoods.[65] We begin “widening our gaze” from the vantage of the 2023 University of Manitoba event called “Is MAiD the New Eugenics?” wherein speakers discussed the overarching message emerging from changes to MAiD legislation. The event concluded that by removing the clause for a “reasonable and foreseeable death,” the revised MAiD legislation now categorizes “death as an accommodation” based on disability.[66] As Catherine Frazee so succinctly stated at the event, MAiD legislation “will frame death as a benefit conferred under the law, but naming it a benefit does not make it so.”[67] Frazee’s point is that through the discursive turn of “death” into “care,” access to death can be interpreted as a potential asset and disabled people’s dependencies can become justification for further violence.[68]

An Overview of MAiD in Canada

The ethos of disability and death in Canada is not new. Significant events in the past three decades have imprinted public discourse on disability across the country in ways that have led to contemporary MAiD. For example, in 1993, British Colombian Sue Rodriguez unsuccessfully applied to the Supreme Court of Canada to amend the Criminal Code to allow for physician-assisted death in the face of a terminal illness. The same year, Saskatchewan farmer Robert Latimer killed his 12-year-old daughter, Tracy, who had cerebral palsy. This murder prompted new cultural discourse about euthanasia for those lacking the “capacity to decide for themselves whether their life [is] worth living.”[69] Decades on, Latimer’s lawyer credits his client’s actions with advancing legislation on assisted dying.[70] Later, in 2013, the Supreme Court in Carter v. Canada ruled that there should be equal access to suicide regardless of the person’s level of physical

ability. Following this ruling, the federal government tabled Bill C-14, which stated that Canadian residents deemed competent to make decisions about their healthcare who have a "grievous and irremediable medical condition" may request MAiD.[71] From the ascension of Bill C-14, a cost-benefit analysis began to take shape. Estimates from 2017 suggest assisted death could reduce annual healthcare spending across Canada by between $34.7 million and $136.8 million per year, whereas it is estimated to cost $1.5 to $14.8 million to fund assisted death.[72] The economic benefit conferred by MAiD echoes Giroux's[73] conceptualization of a biopolitics of disposability and Mbembe's positioning of necropolitics as "economic and symbolic violence" which forces entire groups of people to "live at the edge of life."[74]

Legislation expanding MAiD by, among other changes, removing the requirement for a "reasonably foreseeable" death, passed in March 2021[75] despite sustained activism, including the Disability Filibuster.[76] Changes to MAiD legislation during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when non-disabled Ontarians were eligible for the Canada Recovery Benefit of $2,000 per month and disabled Ontarians were subject to ODSP and continued to receive a maximum of $1,169 monthly, made clear the inequitable access to life-sustaining resources.[77] With the rising cost of living in Ontario, dying became "cost-effective," and stories of disabled people choosing MAiD because they could not afford to live surfaced.[78] What the thanatopolitical rhetoric about MAiD obscured was the conflation of choice and meaningful choice. Indeed, according to Jan Grue, this is perhaps where the differentiation between thanatopolitics and necropolitics becomes clear. Thanatopolitics is interested in the rhetorical production of access to death as "good deaths" and it is this rhetoric that shapes the meaning of death.[79] As disability historian Paul Longmore once wrote, "given the absence of any real choice, death by assisted suicide becomes not an act of personal autonomy but an act of desperation. It is fictional freedom; it is phony autonomy."[80] We offer this context to expand on the "uniquely MAiD ideology" in Canada that impacts disabled artists' livelihoods described below.

Project Background

In this exploratory inquiry we took a critical action approach, which involved cultivating a deep understanding of the complexity of disabled artists' lives and experiences through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.[81] In-depth interviewing is a social form built on intimacy and the gradual accumulation of knowledge.[82] Our gradual understanding of participants began during the recruitment process when our call for research participation asked potential participants to fill in a recruitment form to describe themselves. Of 70 people who filled in the form, we chose 20 artists from across Ontario as key informants.

Methodology

Our semi-structured, in-depth interviews were composed of questions that invited interviewees to tell stories and offer detailed descriptions of their lives and livelihoods as disabled artists.[83] Our approach understood the interview space as one rife with feelings, responses, and emotions, which meant we structured the interviews with room for breaks, long pauses, and opportunities to opt out of questions.[84] Following a sustainable livelihoods approach, we were interested in each person's lived experiences, values, and decisions, and we used the information on the recruitment form as a launching point.[85] We offered several open-ended questions about the artists and their experiences, "recognizing that they make choices, in particular contexts and constraints, and with livelihoods outcomes."[86] To explore these choices, and better understand the contexts and constraints in which they are made, we aimed to treat interviewees as active agents in producing knowledge as they made sense of their world and praxis by inquiring collaboratively to generate insights.[87] This action approach takes a participative and systemic view of the world, and positions acting and knowing as relational—that is, "under the table" acts that can be revealed and better understood through in-depth discussion.[88]

Participants

Of the 20 participants, 6 identified as Deaf or hard of hearing, 13 identified as intellectually disabled, 11 identified as a person of color, 5 identified as Indigenous, and 7 identified as mad. These overlapping identity categories proved to be inadequate in encompassing participants' identities, as many responded at length to the final recruitment question that asked if there was anything else they would like the research team to know. For example, one interviewee noted how they "kind of don't fit into boxes easy" as their identity overflowed the categories we offered, stating "I'm two spirit, trans. I'm a person of colour. I consider myself to be gender queer and, and also like queer in sexuality . . . I'm Indigenous mixed race, but then people assume I'm Indigenous to Turtle Island, and I'm not . . . I'm first generation born on Turtle Island." Another interviewee who identified with "none of the above" categories noted that "mine is an invisible disability which faces highly particular challenges as my degree of pain and impairment is quite literally invisible to even those who know me best." Through an in-depth recruitment process, all interviewees came into this project having told a story about themselves, their multifaceted identities and embodiment, and their relationship to art prior to the interview.

Although in-depth interviewing generally involves face-to-face interaction,[89] our data generation happened over Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns that prevented in-person interaction. At times, participants showed their art by holding up artwork, singing, or moving around their space. All interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and were transcribed and anonymized. Participants were given the option of using a pseudonym to identify themselves. Here, we name and describe each interviewee who appears in this paper using the terms they assigned to themselves for the purpose of publication: Frank, an Indigenous sculptor; Winston, a hard-of-hearing craft witch with chronic pain; Jennifer, a neurodiverse graphic artist; Kiran, a chronically ill visual artist of color; Chrystal, an Indigenous multimedia artist; Emily, a neurodivergent actor and

filmmaker who identifies as fat, queer, and disabled; Buffy, a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse artist; Shaffie, a Deaf, Muslim woman of color and painter; Andreas, a playwright and actor with an intellectual disability; Whitebear, a two-spirited, Indigenous inter-/multi-interdisciplinary artist of mixed heritage; mad illustrator of color, Fabian; Salina, an immigrant and neurodiverse multidisciplinary artist of color; Yuki, a neurodiverse artist; Peppercat, a Mad[90] filmmaker; and Erin, a disabled circus arts performer.

Disposability, Dignity, and Art as Resistance in Necropolitical Contexts

Disposability

As our interviews unfolded, we began noticing comments from artists about the ways in which they were "living at the edge of life," as Mbembe writes in his description of the logics of disposability.[91] Disposability, a key characteristic of necropolitical contexts, happens through "small doses" of violence such as those described by the artists. For example, Jennifer, a neurodiverse graphic artist, described her desire to use "art as a voice and use it in some way to make people understand how hard it is [voice breaking] to not be heard . . . or recognized as a person of value." However, she felt unsure about how to "make art to fix . . . or heal" experiences of oppression that emerge in an ableist context. A chronically ill visual artist of color, Kiran, echoed Jennifer's sentiment by stating,

> I remember not feeling represented at all through art when I was younger. So like, I think just showing other people that . . . our voices do matter. And we are not disposable and we're going to make sure people know that.

Although not all interviewees were involved with state welfare systems, some participants were ODSP recipients, highlighting how institutional structures, like

disability support, can contribute to the confinement and impoverishment of certain population.

Several interviewees described the difficulties of living on the amount provided by the program. These difficulties are compounded by the complexity of the ODSP system and the need to advocate for oneself. Surviving under this precarious system of material asset and social liability was described as emotionally draining and frustrating. As Indigenous sculptor Frank noted,

> It just started affecting me more and more as I got older. It makes sense that it would affect me as I get older, because I'm less and less of a person. . . . You don't have the strength you used to have; you don't have the patience you used to have. You don't have a better mindset to look at things in a more positive way. You get beaten down. And that's what I find, you get beaten down longer and longer the situation remains the same.

Several artists noted the continual need to validate and prove their disability to receive poverty-level funding. Winston, a hard-of-hearing craft-witch with chronic pain, remarked that having to "prove my disability has always been a huge fight and it has been very, very . . . diminishing. It has made me feel very small and unworthy." Similarly, Emily, mad neurodiverse filmmaker, and performance artist, echoed this sentiment, describing the "hoops they make you jump through" as "disgustingly stressful." Other artists gestured to how living in poverty was a struggle, with Frank noting that those with "decision-making authority" did not understand.

Significantly, this sense of disposability was entangled with the other social locations and identities that the artists inhabited. For example, Indigenous multimedia artist, Chrystal, stated that shame and internalized racism affects knowing and accepting your life as valuable. Neurodivergent actor and filmmaker, Emily, noted how difficult it is as a fat, queer disabled woman to be seen as an artist, stating that it can be "very dehumanizing." Shaffie, a Deaf woman of color and painter, also described the discrimination she experienced as a Muslim

woman who is also Deaf and how this discrimination has impacted both her and her family. She went on to say that "I've held most of that in. I find the only outlet, the best outlet for that, is in my art." The overwhelming experience of needing to prove one's value in the face of a society which devalues disabled life led Andreas, a playwright and actor with an intellectual disability, to declare, "I am a human being with feelings."

Participants' positioning as people resisting dehumanization, including through their art, is reflective of necropolitical disposability, wherein those without such resources are often left to struggle on their own or, in many instances, are deliberately subjected to harm or death within these systems. As COVID-19 demonstrated, racialized and disabled populations—along with essential workers and the elderly—were regarded as disposable, subjected to conditions so unsafe that they could lead to death, or, in the case of MAiD, actively caused death.[92]

Dignity

Disposability was entangled with conceptualizations of artists' worthiness of respect, which we characterize as dignity. We engage with the word "dignity" carefully, knowing that in Canada, the word is closely linked to MAiD. As Frazee notes, the term "dignity" is commonly used in mainstream affective and emotive language such as "dying with dignity," which "diverts attention from the deeper question of how our laws and social policy respond to human vulnerability and decline" and, again, raises questions about dignity as an intangible asset.[93] Nonetheless, "dignity" emerged as a term used by artists to describe their experiences. Kiran, a chronically ill visual artist of color stated, "We never have dignity, we never have dignity, there's never dignity for us." Kiran continued, linking his discussion of a lack of dignity to inspiration porn (the portrayal of disabled people as inspirational based on their life circumstances) and poverty porn (the exploitation of people in poverty to generate sympathy), stating,

> we make disabled bodies this spectacle. And I feel like that's the only way for people to ask for help; you have to really like to sell yourself, sell your struggles in order to get any kind of help. And I don't think people should have to do that. There are venues that I'll talk to that I'm like, "Are you wheelchair accessible?" and they're like "No, but we can try to fit a wheelchair"—and I'm like "No, they shouldn't have to go around the back. They should just be able to roll in as they please." So yeah, I think like just, it's not as easy as putting the ramp in. But where are you putting it? Is it prioritized the same way that a regular door would be?

However, many artists also offered new meaning to the term "dignity" as they described their artistry. They gestured to the ways in which creating arts and culture provided them with dignity and offered new vantage points from which to view the isolation and hardships endured through the pandemic. As Whitebear, a two-spirited Indigenous multi-interdisciplinary artist of mixed heritage, stated, "Art does make life beautiful. Because right now I see in quarantine what's keeping people hopeful: it's art." Whitebear asserted that "With great art comes a wealth of experience," and said that art's teachings are invaluable to society. Erin, a double amputee circus artist, described coming back to the arts as the process of finding dignity in her new disabled life following a car accident that forever changed her body, stating, "I finally just got to the point where I had to do something. And I thought, if I wanna die, that's always an option there; but let's try something different." Through Erin's statement, especially, we note a challenge to the rhetorical directive of "dying with dignity" that suggests there is dignity in living creatively.

For some artists, dignity was tied to neoliberal-ableist notions of productivity. For example, mad illustrator of color, Fabian, described the social pressure to have a "sort of A+ top-tier vigil mindset of, there's no off days . . . Every day that you're not working is a day that's lost" and how this mindset makes the self-care needed for their mental health difficult, especially when art is not seen as "real work." This need for productivity, for some artists, was a "9–5," or a "normal" job, and was made more difficult when tied to the desire for benefits packages often provided

by full-time employment. Others described self-employment or entrepreneurship. As Salina, an immigrant and neurodiverse multidisciplinary artist of color, noted, "As an entrepreneur you work so hard . . . you're going to be bleeding and dying and it's going to be awful." Emily, mad neurodiverse filmmaker and performance artist, turned this focus on productivity inwards and wondered "how much more I could get done if I just didn't want to die all the time." These comments by interviewees are particularly pertinent as we know that in health crises, necropolitics exacerbates the marginalization of those labelled "non-productive," reducing them to sacrificed bodies for capital accumulation.[94] Moreover, health and the right to life are significantly shaped by ableism which defines "a good life" in terms of productivity within a capitalist framework.[95]

Art as Resistance

The production of disability culture through arts practices was a site of resistance for many artists. Several described their art practice as one that challenged the rhetoric of disposability by deepening their connection to their own values, desires, and larger disability culture. For example, mid-career artist Yuki describes her neurodivergence as what brings her "closer and closer to my own personal dialogue," which provides a different perspective than the "normative view." Winston echoed Yuki, stating,

> I make art because it makes me feel more connected to myself … It makes me feel like I understand myself a little better. And every time I make art I feel a little closer to myself.

This comment suggests that artists are the ones giving life to non-biomedical understandings of disability—they are literally and figuratively creating new language, forms, perspectives, perceptions, etc., by deeply mining and grappling to represent aspects of non-normative embodied and embedded life from the inside out.

Others described the production of art as resistance to isolation and an experience of the affect of solidarity that emerges through arts practice and community. For example, Winston describes how his art is a visual representation of his experiences of pain and isolation, and how creativity "just kind of brings you back to yourself. I think we were created to create." Whitebear asserted that disabled artists were "leading the way through this pandemic" by sharing strategies for isolation and lack of access to resources that nondisabled people were just starting to experience. Yuki echoes these sentiments and describes her art practice, particularly in relation to the difficulty of communicating, as "a survival mechanism." Still others describe the empathy emerging from their lived experience as disability cultural producers. Jennifer, a neurodiverse graphic artist, says:

> I think that what my experiences have taught me is an incredible level of empathy. I feel like I relate to people better, and I feel like I read art better than I did before. I feel like I relate to just everything better than I did before.

These feelings of empathy also arose in and from the broader disability arts community. For example, Peppercat, a Mad filmmaker, described finding empathy in the mad arts community, which supported her artistic practice of documentary filmmaking. In this way, art can be a powerful form of resistance to necropolitics by nurturing communities, and fostering dignity. Moreover, art has the potential to affirm non-disposability. As Kiran, a neurodiverse multimedia artist of color describes, the need to make art is a form of resistance to necropolitical disposability, noting how art shows people that "our voices do matter . . . we are not disposable and we're going to make sure people know that." In attempting to survive the Canadian necro-economy, which prioritizes profit over life, art emerges as a tool for reclaiming agency in the face of neoliberal-ableism.

The interviews also revealed that, for these artists, a significant part of resistance through art was the building and nurturing of community. While some artists felt

that disability and Deaf arts communities were “having a moment,” others felt that the art and communities of artists were undervalued. Of the attempt to sustain and nurture community, Buffy, a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse artist, noted that for her this meant “trying to be present, whether that’s physically or more digitally.” Conversely, despite attempts to nurture community, its absence was noted by some, including Shaffie, a Black Deaf painter. This lack of community was partly due to the small numbers of Deaf artists in Canada and the limited American Sign Language interpreters available and skilled in artistic interpretation. Access to community was region-dependent, with Chrystal, an Indigenous multimedia artist, stating that a disability arts community in her region was non-existent, while Peppercat noted Montreal had a thriving disability arts community, Erin described Calgary as a hotspot for disability arts, and several artists noted the burgeoning disability arts scene in Toronto. For some artists, like Jennifer, the shift to online during COVID-19 meant that online disability communities became easier to find and access.

Feeling part of a disability community, however, is impacted by the internalized feeling that one needs to prove that one is disabled enough. This perception was particularly noted by artists when applying for grants earmarked for disability and Deaf artists. As Emily, a mad neurodiverse filmmaker and performance artist, states, “I sort of struggle with feeling that I’m not disabled enough.” She went on to note:

> I think part of it is … choosing what identities to disclose or I guess to build your art around. At least on the professional side of things. So that kind of goes back to what I was saying earlier, you know, if I talked all the time about how much I wanted to die, people would probably write me off very quickly.

Other artists linked the continual need to validate their disability back to the application process for ODSP, as outlined in the subsection on disposability.

“Widening Our Gaze” to De-Neutralize Care and Art

The work of “widening our gaze in concrete terms” involves expanding livelihoods frameworks to include and work beyond a *sustainable* livelihoods approach, and in so doing we account for the ways in which disabled, Deaf, and mad artists demonstrate their unique understandings of what it means to build and sustain a life in a Canadian necro-economy fuelled by eugenic capitalism. It is clear that the artists interviewed for this project position themselves complexly through lenses of disposability, dignity, and resistance which are tethered to the “uniquely MAiD ideology” that is embedded in their experiences of sustaining themselves and their artistry.[96] Indeed, the very personal work of creating art was almost always intertwined with the complex navigation of state-based funding systems and the national impetus to contain disabled populations. The line between disabled artists’ experiences and the imposition of “decision-making authority,” as noted by Frank, was clear in every interview. And, even paired with thoughts about and affect toward resistance, the neutralization of “care” structures—from state-based funding to arts grants to assistance in dying—proved difficult for artists to navigate and survive, demonstrating their disposability and leading to compromises in, and lack of, dignity unless this feeling could be countered by “productive” artwork.

Overall, the punishing conditions of neoliberal-ableism were articulated by many of the interviewees, whose lives and artistry do not assimilate into normative societal roles. The positioning of many of these artists outside of the normative labor market resulted in feelings of disposability, with echoes of Berlant’s descriptions of “slow death.”[97] For example, Frank’s and Winston’s respective descriptions of themselves as “less and less of a person” and as “diminishing” speak to feelings compounded by intersectional identity markers including and beyond disability. Given that the biopolitics of disposability is a key feature of

necro-economies,[98] through these artists' dialogues we reach a possible response to Mbembe's question of who is disposable and who is not:[99] disabled artists *feel* disposable, and are well aware of their precarious positioning in a neoliberalized former welfare state. Indeed, this positioning forces participants to advocate for themselves and "prove" their eligibility both for state support and artistic support as they navigate conditions of poverty. This process of self-advocacy and system navigation is intrinsic to the lives and livelihoods of disabled artists. We consider disposability to be an intangible aspect of poverty that accompanies the material aspects of poverty these artists described, even amid their demonstrated ability to build, explore, and achieve non-market-oriented approaches to life. We question how a sustainable livelihoods approach with a focus on assets might lead to the assessment of the intangible. For example, when disabled people's lives are mired in disposability, access to death via MAiD may be interpreted as a material, social, and intangible asset *and* liability.

Further, the interview excerpts above demonstrate a palpable absence of dignity in some artists' lives, while others, including Whitebear, express having found dignity in the work of creating art. Notably, the concept of "dignity" has been important in the country's public discourse about MAiD, encompassed as it is in the ethos of eugenics. Although the interviewees in this project did not turn their attention toward "dying with dignity" discourse, it is notable that dignity as a concept emerged alongside talk about death. For some artists, including Erin and Emily, the option to die is actively in play as they engage with artistry and the work of creating and maintaining their livelihoods. While some artists reported establishing dignity in their lives (including through artistry), the discovery or recovery of dignity was, at times, paired with the option of death. This pairing suggests that disabled artists' lives are inseparable from Canadian eugenics, and ongoing thanatopolitical discourses about MAiD that continue to control disabled populations.

Finally, the theme of art-as-resistance reigned over this data. Resistance emerged though artistry for many interviewees who used art to resist feelings of disposability and to uphold dignity. For some, art served as an anti-eugenic connection to disability culture and as a means to produce and participate in disability or crip cultural practices,[100] a sentiment in line with the deeply political work of disability arts movements.[101] Such practices support disabled people's lives and advocate for a future that includes the lives of disabled people—a significant gesture in a context where eugenics continues to haunt us all. Even amid the pandemic, artists pointed to the accessible, online disability arts practices that flourished during the province-wide lockdowns as a resistance to isolation long felt by disabled people, and that nondisabled people were also beginning to experience.[102] We note with concern, however, that the process of becoming part of the disability community and benefiting from its life-giving ethos also involved complex experiences of disclosure, and a continual grappling with the choice to live or die, as Emily describes. These concerns are compounded by research that suggests that disabled artists in Canada face increased barriers to artistry, such as lack of access to mentorship, communication barriers, disconnect to wider arts communities for those artists working outside of urban areas, and inadequate funding structures.[103] In Ontario, uncertainty remains about how ODSP impacts the acquisition of arts grants, which can prevent some artists from applying.[104] Although regional and provincial organizations, including the Ontario Arts Council and Workman Arts, have engaged in advocacy that supports artists in procuring income, state support, and arts funding simultaneously, such actions do not entirely resolve the lingering barriers named above. And, while Canada's disability art scene is undoubtedly flourishing and achieving major advances in disability, Deaf, and mad artistry on a global scale,[105] this movement remains somewhat inaccessible to some of the artists interviewed for this project. This distance from the wider movement is connected to the necropolitical structures that govern all disabled people in Canada. Ultimately, Berlant takes up such population management as a way of diverting threats

against the “good life”—a concept unignorable in a sustainable livelihoods approach that asks how disabled artists’ lives are made livable.[106]

Conclusion

With the above interviews in mind, we characterize the lived experiences of disabled people in Canada as death experiences under a “uniquely MAiD ideology” that extends necropolitical capitalism. The lived experiences of disabled artists featured in this paper are rife with the personal and political complexities of disposability, dignity, and resistance. This research demonstrates that questions of livelihoods for disabled artists must contend with the ableist realities of Canada’s necro-economy and the ongoing affects of eugenics. These realities are complex, as demonstrated here by artists who are sustaining themselves by engaging in their artistry as life-giving praxis, thereby securing the necessities of life and establishing their sense of well-being.[107] If we widen our gaze to consider how the necropolitical capitalist economy speeds up “slow death” for some, we can, as Tony Sandset suggests, understand the creation of death-worlds through the opening up of MAiD to all disabled people as a state of “acceptance” rather than “exception.”[108] The current state of MAiD in Canada, wherein death is positioned as a right and “accommodation,”[109] offers a glimpse at how the neoliberal-ableist rhetoric of assets versus liability and “choice” supports the creation of necropolitical death worlds where disabled artists in this study find themselves positioned. We assert that future research related to the lives and livelihoods of disabled artists, and all disabled people in Canada, must be considered in the context of the death-world necro-economy that actively seeks to contain and eliminate disabled populations.

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Subjunctive Grief: Affective Methodologies for Articulating Futures

by Matthew Wolf-Meyer | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Grief is typically portrayed as an individual experience that is a response to loss and provides the basis for personal growth; grief is something to work through, and, ideally, to benefit from, and represents a state change. But might it be possible to conceptualize grief of the future, a subjunctive grief that is based in speculation about change that brings that change into the present? The subjunctive invokes the wished for, the imagined, and the possible, and subjunctive grief serves to work through the experience of the future in the present. Focusing on debates around medical aid in dying and the parenting of a child with childhood psychosis, I consider grief in the subjunctive tense and how anticipation of change affects practices in the present. Attending to subjunctive grief provides an affective methodology that demonstrates interdependency and how conceptions of intimacy, love, and caregiving shape the experience of grief in the future tense.

KEYWORDS affect theory, death, future, kinship, mourning, psychoanalysis

Subjunctive grief is a way to conceptualize grieving the future and imagining the effects of possible futures. Subjunctive grief works through the current in disability studies that argues against "loss" as the precondition of disability, which often posits that a person once had a capacity and has lost it in some irreparable way.[1] Instead, disability studies scholars argue for various forms of difference and adaptation that push discussions of loss out of the frame and instead posit something akin to an appreciation for human plasticity, variation, and the ability for people to build sustainable ways of being in the world through interdependent communities.[2] Similarly, subjunctive grief is not predicated on loss but based

upon immanent and imminent—if unpredictable—change; it is based on the imaginary play of bringing the "what if?" into the present. In this way, subjunctive grief addresses something like the death of a loved one not simply because of death-as-loss, but also because death is a state change for a variety of other aspects of a still-living individual's life and relationships. How might the lives of my loved ones change in my absence? How might my life change in their absences? Subjunctive grief also addresses changes beyond our everyday intimacies and might be extended to the anxieties associated with climate change and the inevitable alterations to one's life as the climate unpredictably yet dependably mutates.[3] Dwelling with the subjunctive as the foundation for the inevitability of unpredictable change allows for the possibility that not all change is negative. Instead, change merely indexes the immanent flux of relations and the need for individuals and communities to recalibrate themselves to adapt to emergent conditions. The subjunctive pulls the speculative to the fore and asks for consideration of the connections between people and their worlds[4]—those connections that are marked as well as those that lie dormant until brought into the subjunctive frame.

Subjunctive grief imagines the possibilities of grief as motivational, as something that propels action rather than something that leads to dwelling in despair. The dwelling in grief is something that has long been associated with emotional experiences of loss, from Sigmund Freud's discussion of mourning and melancholia,[5] to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief,[6] to anthropological approaches to grief's social dynamics including Renato Rosaldo's discussion of grief and rage and Charles Briggs' attention to the performance of grief as a ritual enactment.[7] Grief is often posited as a process that an individual goes through, and when grief works—i.e., it is not pathological, leading to depression or ongoing distress—it moves an individual from one state to another; we change through our grief, becoming something other than what we were.[8]. Grief is also always social. It is something that is facilitated or not by the community that a person is a part of; grief connects community members through its ritual enactment and reveals

the connections between people and their world. A failure to do this social work of grieving can also lead to pathological forms of community, whether at the familial or societal levels;[9] a failure to properly grieve can leave individuals and communities in emotional states that metabolize their anger into interpersonal and institutional forms of violence. An avoidance or obfuscation of the mourning work that is to be done can lead to attachments to ways of life that are no longer sustainable due to changing economic and political conditions, as in the investment in "traditional" family structures and the perpetuation of structural inequities that expose some communities to risks that others are protected from.[10] Individually and collectively working through the "what if?" of changing lives and social conditions provides individuals and communities with the imaginative space to anticipate how life and society will change, and how their affective relations will change apace.

In conceiving subjunctive grief, I was motivated by a personal history of grief. After a period of illness associated with aging and Alzheimer's, my father died in 2013. During his illness, my partner and I had our first child, who arrived nearly seven weeks early and spent many of those weeks in the neonatal intensive care unit at the hospital where he was born. My maternal grandmother, with whom I was close, died after a fall down her basement stairs, and my cousin Richard, a veteran of the first Iraq War, died as a result of pancreatic cancer, one of many deaths associated with the suspected use of chemical warfare. It felt like a protracted season of grief, a sign that I had reached middle age, where the babies that were being born into my social world were being weighed against the adult deaths that were occurring at the same time. We moved across the country for new jobs, only to find that they were bad jobs and we lost friendships through the loss of regular contact with distant friends. We grieved for lives we lost through our relocation. We moved again, then again, picking up new relations along the way, knowing that we would lose them, which tinged them with the subjunctive: if that we could stay here with you, what life would we build together? Could we, in

the short term, build a version of that life, knowing that we would lose it—but also that it might live on through our distance and care?

Invoking the subjunctive is a way to work through how the wished for, the imagined, and the possible structure our everyday lives through speculation. In parallel to my conceptualization of the subjunctive and its relationship to grief, Jody Davies's recent work on the subjunctive in psychoanalytic practice points to the importance of the speculative in loving relationships.[11] Davies is writing specifically about "analytic love," the loving attachments that occur through transference and countertransference in the psychoanalytic encounter, where what is possible is limited by the structure of the relationship between analysand and analyst. Writing about a particularly challenging relationship with a client who demands motherly loving attention from Davies, she invokes the subjunctive as "'the would that I could' of the work":[12] if I could love you as your mother, I would, but I cannot because I am your analyst. The absence of this happening in reality, the absence of its actualization, allows for a playful space of speculation and possibility that provides room for the subjunctive to operate. She explains,

> this space can serve as a backdrop and container for a particular kind of analytic play and imagination. Because gratification need not be complete, the "make believe" can be experienced as fun and nurturing, and the offer of certain playful forms of gratification and nurturance need not give rise to the fear of emotional seduction and inevitable disappointment . . . . It is something that must be co-created between patient and analyst in a deeply mutual unfolding, like a spontaneous choreography, a pas de deux of point and counterpoint.[13]

In her relationship with the client who demands her love as a mother, they co-construct an imaginary cottage located along a stream and surrounded by wildflowers where they can love one another unproblematically. What if we were mother and daughter and lived in this cottage together, the subjunctive asks, and we were allowed to inhabit that shared emotional reality as a speculative practice? How might a similar use of the subjunctive—how will I live in the future?, how will

we be together then?—be employed in the grieving process as a way to conceptualize the relations between people and their worlds?

In this essay, I explore subjunctive grief as a methodology. In doing so, I am invested in articulating a method that resists the cognitive biases that many social science and humanistic methodologies embrace, as if rationality and rational decision making exist outside of the affective. Instead, tracking grief through the subjunctive is a means to highlight the role of affective connections in our lives and the ways that they shape individual and collective futures; it provides a method to conceptualize the affective attachments that people have to the future and past and how affect serves as a site to explore these relations.[14]

This essay is necessarily personal, as grief always is.[15] If grief is typically accepted as something that happens to us as a reaction to an emergent situation—the loss of a loved one, the betrayal of a friend, the failure of an institution to act ethically, the devastation of a weather event—subjunctive grief is an anticipatory process. Subjunctive grief asks us to imagine "what if?" and investigate how we can work with potentiality in the present as a means to alleviate concerns with change.[16] As a methodology, grief provides a focus on the connections between people and between people and their worlds by asking, "How would this change affect you? How would you miss this person, this place, this way of life?" Grief provides a webwork of care, both what people care about and who and what they care for, human and nonhuman, fleshy and not. But grief, like all emotions, is a cultural and individual system of priorities, and other methods rooted in emotions might be equally generative,[17] conceptualizing how, for example, anger or joy works to bind communities provides parallel lenses to draw relations, actors, and institutions together.[18] For me, grief, while not a universal human emotion, provides a foundation for a method that moves against normative assumptions about self-expression through language.[19] Grief can be expressed without words and accepted as an expression of connection between people and between people and things in ways that are accessible to the young and old, the disabled

and able-bodied, the neurotypical and neurodivergent.[20] In the following, I focus on two narratives about families as they struggle to make decisions about care for a family member. In both cases—one focused on medical aid in dying and the other on childhood psychosis (for lack of a better term)—family members wrestle with making the right decision based on a complex network of relations between people, between people and institutions, and between people and the forms of care they desire to have and provide. In their own ways, they confront experiences of inevitable change as the foundation for their decision making, and a conception of inexorable change grounds their experiences of grief as a necessary process to undergo—individually and collectively—by way of determining the ethical decision to make.

Invoking the ethical here is to gesture toward the possibility of a justice orientation that works to address the idiosyncrasies of individual and collective experience. The cases I present below might be construed as invoking "bioethical" concerns, as medical aid in dying has long been a site of political and philosophical debates in the United States and elsewhere and debates about institutionalized forms of care have long animated debates about psychiatry and the ethics of pharmaceuticalization.[21] But here I want to leave bioethics in the strict sense out of the frame, due to its reliance on principle, virtue, pragmatism, and utilitarian reason;[22] Instead, I want to draw on the affective to consider how it might serve as a counterpoint to positions that cast themselves as objective and rational.[23] In making this move to the affective, attention to the *feeling of justice* and its constant deferral[24] resonates with the subjunctivity of grief and attempts to mobilize the deferrals that disability communities address in seeking support for making and sustaining livable lives. What would it feel like to have one's access needs fully met?[25] To have one's personhood fully supported by communicative practices that allow for diverse forms of expression, such as sign language and other assistive technologies?[26] To have institutional support for forms of community that make lives more livable outside of disability's medicalization?[27] Anticipating a fully just world has the potential to surface experiences of grief,

particularly as one asks why that just world is impossible and what would need to occur to make it a reality. The subjunctive provides a space to imagine how justice might be enacted in the present and how it might inform the bioethical in ways that expand it to address the affective lives of the people bioethics captures.

The challenge in grief, which Freud identifies early on and which has been explored by those who followed him, is that in states of mourning, action becomes difficult. This is especially the case in the form of grief that he refers to as melancholia, which is characterized by its non-specific and generalized state; melancholia is akin to depression, a pervasive and seemingly unending lack of affect paired with a sense of inefficacy in the ability to change one's circumstances.[28] Mourning, contrariwise, is characterized by its sense of progression. While it is tempting to assert that ritual is important in mourning, including the standard practices of funeral rites,[29] ritual in the strict sense is less important than social commitment to grieving as a process, which aids in individual reintegration into society.[30] Mourning depends upon specificity and Freud describes it as the gradual acceptance of the loss, leading to the ability to form new attachments; he writes, "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."[31] Mourning's power comes from its specificity, its ability to name what has changed and how it has changed. In this way, mourning is integral to subjunctive grief as a method, but it depends upon enacting mourning in the present—not because of a loss that has occurred, but with acceptance of changes that are or might be underway. Like a kinship chart demonstrating relational connections between individuals, subjunctive grief asks after the connections between people and their worlds—however they may be indexed or narrated—and how those connections animate people. In tracing those connections, subjunctive grief becomes a method to demonstrate the complex webs of vitality that sustain people. In the following, these connections become apparent through the emergence of something unexpected. In the first case, it propels a couple through a process of mourning in the present, as they confront a terminal illness; in the second, it captures a family in a state of protracted distress

and mourning until the mother comes to appreciate the nature of the risks they face as a family. They provide examples of people working through the "what if?" of the subjunctive and through this work they are able to make changes in the present that affect individual and collective futures.

Regimes of Inevitability

The "inevitability" of any process serves as the grounds for ethical decision making about it.[32] Processes that are inevitable cannot be acted upon in any meaningful way so as to alter their course, although attention might be paid to the effects of the process in order to mitigate its effects. Natural processes are generally ascribed degrees of agency that make them impossible for human action to mitigate,[33] and natural processes that humans undergo—from the daily wages of hunger and sleep to effects of aging—are afforded a degree of inevitability that can often only be acted upon by something suitably powerful, typically pharmaceutical chemicals. But even those chemicals reach a limit of effectiveness when held against the extremes of inevitable processes: eventually, days of hunger will result in organ failure; days of sleeplessness will result in uncontrolled sleep; aging will result in death; and terminal illnesses will likewise result in death. It is in this context that Americans have debated the ethical role of medically assisted death, sometimes referred to as physician-assisted suicide or, incorrectly, euthanasia, which is when the physician is solely responsible for the act of killing, rather than that decision being led by the patient. Proponents point to the inevitability of death and the parallel inevitability of "suffering" that will occur along the march toward death. Intense pain, loss of bodily volition, and dementia are all routinely cited as reasons to speed one's death through medical assistance. Many Americans support the practice—as of 2024, it was legal in eleven states—yet it is hotly contested by a minority of Americans who argue that it is human interference with divine inevitability (i.e., "only God can choose when a

person dies"), which points to the regimes of inevitability that structure its ethical contestation.

In addition, many disability activists argue against medical aid in dying, often citing the implicit ableism of the practice and the threat of creeping forms of coercion that incentivize killing disabled people over making their lives better through structural investments.[34] As examples of these kinds of critiques, the work of Not Dead Yet, a disability-based activist organization, and the work of Mary Johnson are illustrative. Not Dead Yet advocates call for opposition to the "legalization of assisted suicide," ensuring "that the withholding or withdrawal of life-sustaining medical treatment is truly voluntary," that "futility policies involving health care provider decisions to withhold or withdraw life-sustaining medical treatment" are opposed, and that "equal protection of the law in homicide cases when the victim is old, ill or disabled" is advocated for.[35] As Mary Johnson writes in *Ragged Edge*, surveying disability rights groups' responses to case of Terri Schiavo and the discontinuation of her life support,

> The only way disability bigotry of the "better dead than disabled" school has any chance of being stamped out–or even dislodged a bit–is if the disability rights movement is willing to speak forcefully and publicly about the tie-in between emerging public policies that in the guise of cost containment and choice in dying both promote futile care policies and define feeding tubes as "medical care," and the look-the-other-way stances of progressives and right-to-lifers alike as Medicaid is cut, healthcare services are cut, and anti-access judges are appointed to the federal branch.[36]

Johnson understands, much like the advocates in Not Dead Yet, that an inexorable slide towards a new eugenics through medical aid in dying is occurring, one that identifies individuals who do not meet the implicit standards of American neurotypicality as being "better dead than disabled." At the time of Schiavo's death in 2005, Diane Coleman, of Not Dead Yet, remarked that "The social presumption that [Schiavo] would be better off dead appears to have influenced

the decisions in this case. We feel threatened by this, almost as if there is a cognitive test for personhood under the law."[37] What Coleman feared in 2005 was a return to a eugenicist ideology motivated by a conception of disabled individuals as being unfit to live, which may be paired with forms of coercion that lead to euthanasia being masked as medical aid in dying—a situation not far removed from current debates in Canada and the US.[38] Because of these concerns about coercion, states where medical aid in dying laws have been enacted, like Oregon, have strict guidelines for determining if an individual is eligible for medical aid in dying based on cognitive capacity and consent.[39] Central to these debates are questions about "letting die" and "killing," which often skirt issues of self-determination, that many disability activists work to support.[40]

The way an individual narrates their choice to pursue medically assisted death reveals how they accept their abilities to act upon the future[41] and to grieve for the changes that they and their loved ones will undergo alongside their terminal illness and eventual death. One of the most public cases of medically assisted death is that of Brittany Maynard's, which occurred in 2014. Diagnosed with an aggressive brain cancer at 29, Maynard was originally given three to five years to live, predicated on successful treatment outcomes. After the removal of a significant amount of tumor, she was then re-diagnosed with an even more aggressive form of brain cancer, glioblastoma multiforme, and given just six months to live. Aware of "death with dignity" legislation in Oregon as the result of a college course she had taken, she and her newlywed husband moved from the Bay Area in California to Oregon so that she could avail herself of the life-ending medications she was entitled to as an Oregonian but which, at the time, were unavailable to her in California. The process required that she be independently diagnosed with a terminal illness by two doctors, be diagnosed as mentally fit, undergo a fifteen-day waiting period before requesting the drugs verbally and in writing, and then seek approval for a secobarbital prescription that would prove lethal. The drugs would be dispensed to her, but it would be up to her and her

partner, Daniel Diaz, to administer them when she chose to use them. Technically, she would need to administer them herself, in a glass of water mixed with the drugs, which obviated the possibility that someone else would administer the drugs to her against her will.

Throughout the process of seeking medical aid in dying, Maynard adopted the role of a public advocate for the process; she sought to make it possible for other families to avoid having to relocate to a distant state in order to avail themselves of the right and support for medical aid in dying. She recorded videos and posted them to YouTube and wrote editorials for national publications. Since her death, her widower has adopted this role of public advocate, partnering with the national advocacy group Compassion and Choices, and making media appearances—on podcasts, radio, and in Diane Rehm's documentary *When My Time Comes* (2021)—to promote legislation across the US in support of medical aid in dying. In his interview with Rehm, Diaz describes Maynard's experience balancing the impending physiological changes wrought by the cancer and its side effects with the fears associated with living in a society in which she is unable to end her life in the way that she wants to. He explains,

> She felt a lot of pressure at the base of her skull and neck . . . . By July, August, September, October . . . those last two months she was getting more and more uncomfortable. The seizures were what terrified her the most, and those became more frequent and more severe . . . The expression on her face became different because her muscles were contracting. The rest of her body would start to twitch—her arms, her legs . . . . She would usually be unable to speak or communicate at all or to write anything for maybe twenty or thirty minutes afterward. The sentences she would try to form wouldn't make any sense. Those were the mild seizures. The full grand mal seizures . . . were terrifying since on a couple of occasions, as she came out of the seizure and kind of regained consciousness, blood came out of her mouth because she'd bitten through part of her tongue.[42]

The danger Maynard perceived lay in the formulation of the medical aid in dying laws, which stipulated that she needed to self-administer the secobarbital that would end her life. If she was partially or completely paralyzed, she would be unable to do this, which would result in an end of life that she was hoping to avoid. She and Diaz accepted her impending death and the limitations she faced in relation to her changing body, but were committed to ensuring that they spent the last six months of their time together doing what they wanted: traveling, going for hikes and walks, and visiting with friends and relatives. Maynard accepted that doing this meant forgoing aggressive treatments of her cancer, knowing that undergoing treatment would inevitably have limited benefits and render her unable to participate in the activities that she wanted to prioritize, as she would be restricted to home or hospital during treatment.

Over these last months of her life, Maynard experienced the ups and downs of the remission and return of symptoms, and the everyday hope and dismay that come with living with a terminal illness. She had the support of her partner and family, the financial resources to relocate to Oregon, and the resources to navigate the medical systems in California and Oregon. The costs associated with her diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing care were significant and would make it impossible for a person of lesser means to accomplish what she and her partner were able to do. Diaz was able to arrange for leave from his employer, which came with partial pay. After they secured Maynard's medical aid in dying request, she narrated her experience as one of "relief." Even though she may "suffer" through her last months and days of life, she felt able to live while mourning; she was able to travel with her partner, advocate for medical aid in dying, and accomplish the goals she set for her last six months. She was motivated by the "would that we could live our lives together" without terminal cancer. This produced an impetus to live life as much as possible as unhindered by her dying through the use of the subjunctive. Her grieving the present was predicated upon her ability to narrate the changes that were occurring in the connections she prioritized, her

relationships with loved ones and her world, and how they will change with her advancing illness and death. Diaz explains,

> When she received approval for the medication, it provided her with an enormous sense of relief, a sense of having just a little bit of control in the midst of the chaos of a brain tumor. So much felt completely out of her control. Having the secobarbital allowed her to focus on life, because she no longer had to be so concerned about the dying process. It allowed her to do the things she wanted to do . . . . Her outlook from that point on was completely different. That fear was gone. She could now focus on living life, not being terrified to death.[43]

The removal of "fear" moves Maynard from a position of generalized despair toward mourning. As Diaz explains, she could "focus on living life," which allowed her to grieve her future changes through attending to the activities and relationships in her life that were more important than her dying. Being able to assert "control" over the inevitability of her dying and the limited future that cancer imposed on her and her relationships could, for Maynard, only be contested with her ability to control that death and its precise moment; she needed to bring the future into the present in order to motivate the actions she sought to undertake, both in advocating for her needs related to medical aid in dying and also in her relations with her loved ones. Some modicum of control of the future allows for a space in the present to accept the change that is occurring and the grieving that needs to occur in relation to that future, and it is this subjunctive space that is purposefully carved out against the inevitability of death through the social and material provisions of medical aid in dying policies.

Diaz goes on to explain the events that occurred during Maynard's final days, explaining how the intensity and regularity of her seizures increased to the degree that she feared the loss of the ability to consume the secobarbital, meaning that her ability to end her life would be forfeit and she would have to let death take its natural course, with its anticipated suffering. Maynard's goal became living through October in order to celebrate her and Diaz's wedding anniversary and his

birthday; they set November 1 as the day that she would end her life. Diaz explains, "During the last month of her life, the seizures were coming every four or five days. As the tumor continued to grow and put pressure on different parts of the brain, it would push on the optic nerve and she would lose her eyesight . . . . Partial paralysis was likely, complete paralysis a possibility. That's what Brittany was facing. And she said, 'I will not die that way.'"[44] He goes on to explain, "It's not that Brittany was choosing between living and dying. The living part was not on the table. The only thing Brittany was choosing between was two different ways of dying. One was gentle, the other would have been filled with pain and suffering . . . . She wanted to live. The brain tumor was ending her life."[45] In this way, Diaz and Maynard narrate their use of medical aid in dying as a choice that empowers them to live their lives as they want to, despite the inevitabilities of Maynard's cancer's progression. Subjunctive grief becomes possible in the acknowledgement of change, but its possibility as a practice of mourning depends on some facility of control over the inevitabilities of the future and what it will bring. Subjunctive grief asks, what might one do in the present to mitigate the affective inevitabilities on the horizon? Medical aid in dying is often cast in this way, creating a narrative structure for something that might otherwise feel out of control; in situations where control is elusive, it is less possible for grief to be articulated, as change seems impossible to acknowledge and work toward.

Maynard and Diaz are exemplary in their ability to face their grief head-on. Knowing they have a limited amount of time left together, they set about ensuring that the connections they find most important are brought to the fore. They collectively imagine the "would if I were dying" and together inhabit the space that is constructed between them with its revealed priorities. Amongst these, the ability to control Maynard's experience of death is primary, and once they have secured their ability to control the timing of her death, they engage in the activities and relationships that animate them. Maynard spends time with family and friends, travels to visit state and national parks throughout the US, and walks and hikes with her partner. That they are dislocated to Oregon to secure

Maynard's ability to access medical aid in dying is no small inconvenience, and it is precisely this that leads them to a place of advocacy for medical aid in dying across the US. A byproduct of this advocacy may be the ability for others to engage in a mourning practice like theirs, an enactment of subjunctive grief that brings the future into the present where it can serve as the basis of action and reflection.

Facilitating Monstrousness

I first heard Cheryl's story thanks to an episode of the NPR show *This American Life*, entitled "Bad Baby."[46] I have a distinct memory of listening to it while doing yard work, our first child in the house with my partner, his having recently turned three. Cheryl's family narrative is striking, which is captured in the brief interview she provides Ira Glass and is more developed in a blog she kept throughout 2014, myfamilymyvillage.com, that has since been abandoned but is archived through the Wayback Machine.[47] Cheryl narrates her experience as the mother of three children, two boys and a girl. The oldest of the children, eight at the time of the episode's recording, is extremely violent toward his brother and sister, having attempted to smother and drown his brother several times. He has aggressively thrown his little sister, who was cushioned by landing on a mattress. He has attacked his mother, giving her black eyes and a broken nose. His teachers and principal report that his behavior at school is disruptive in ways that they have not experienced with other students. His family regularly works with therapists, pediatricians, and psychiatrists, both in an effort to understand whether there is something about their family dynamics and parenting approach that leads the child to act in the way that he does and also to find means of mitigating his behavior, which leads them through various pharmaceutical treatments. The challenge for Cheryl and her family is that her oldest son seems impossible to change in any meaningful way, at least without heavy sedation, which removes his personality entirely. Whatever is the root cause of her eldest son's violent

behaviors and his apparent enjoyment of them, whether physiological (e.g., brain chemistry or an invisible impairment) or social (e.g., family dynamics or individual trauma), the behaviors seem unable to change. This has led experts to diagnoses of ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, mood dysregulation disorder, autism, and callous-unemotional, the last of which is sometimes accepted as a precursor to adult psychopathologies because it describes patterned disregard for the emotional experiences of others, aligning it with diagnoses of sociopathy and psychopathy.[48] Cheryl is put in the position of considering what she and her family can do to support her eldest son while also protecting themselves from his violence, particularly when his behavior is a constantly changing terrain of possibility.

Cheryl narrates their family experience, highlighting both her sense of her eldest child being "normal," and the inevitability of her eldest son's behavior, which they are unable to shape in ways that protect their family. He seems, to Cheryl, unperturbed by his attempt to kill his younger brother, and more troubled by being admonished by his mother for his actions.

> He was affectionate, seemed to be very attached to me. He seemed to be a normal child. I don't remember seeing a lot of aggression in him when he was littler . . . . And there was never any reason for his behavior. He just showed significant aggression towards me and towards his brother. And it was every day. When I look back, I realize that we've been walking on eggshells with this child since he was very little . . . . He decided to hold his brother under water in our backyard swimming pool. I was standing there about five feet away and felt some kind of commotion and turned around. And my son popped up out of the water, hysterical. My younger son popped up hysterical . . . . He did it and never acknowledged the danger of what he did. It never hits him that he could have killed his brother. It never seems to bother him that that was a possibility.[49]

Cheryl understands her eldest son as exhibiting a set of violent behaviors that exist beyond control; they are often spontaneous reactions to social interactions that he is having, which lead him to lash out at family members. Added to this, he

seems unreflexive about his behaviors and their impacts—physical, social, and emotional—on his family members. In these ways, he appears to meet the criteria for psychosis, his violent tendencies underwritten by a lack of compassion and social sensitivity. Cheryl finds her role as a mother—who must care for all of her children—to be troubled by her need to care for a child who puts his siblings and her at physical and emotional risk. She confronts this trouble by working through her understandings of her role as a mother and what it might become; she is buffeted by a sense of loss of her "normal child" and her need to find a way forward for her family amid the inevitabilities of his behaviors and their dangers.

In the following, Cheryl recounts her experience of parenting after her eldest son breaks her nose with his knee while she cuddles him on his bed. She draws attention to her experience of parenting as one that is based in a "natural" predilection for care for her children, which her eldest son's actions disturb. The trouble she faces is reconciling the need for providing him with "unconditional love"—as something that is scientifically prescribed[50]—and her inability to feel affectionate toward a child who behaves so callously.

> He has since tried to come into my bed, and he'll say I want to snuggle. "I want to snuggle." And it's something that I have to choose to do, because it's not a natural reaction any longer. I have to actually make the conscious decision to hug and love the child. I've read articles about children like him that their best chance at life is to continue to get that unconditional love, and so my husband and I make a concerted effort to grab him and hug him and love him, despite everything that we've been through. But I can tell you, as a parent, I had never expected to have to force myself to hug my child in the morning.

This last turn, "I had never expected to have to force myself to hug my child in the morning," is an index of Cheryl's grief. This experience of grief is predicated on her conception of the inevitable role of "nature" in supporting a maternal instinct which is suspended in relation to the inevitable nature of her eldest child's behavior. Two inevitable natures are pit against each other, and Cheryl's maternal

love buckles in the face of her child's seemingly intractable nature. Laminated onto this is what Cheryl increasingly accepts as a social inevitability: the need to send her eldest son to a residential facility where he can receive full time care in an effort to shape his behaviors while also protecting his family from his violent outbursts.

The solutions that Cheryl and her family are provided largely depend upon the medication of her eldest son, each of his diagnoses carrying the possibility of one or more pharmaceuticals that can be employed to manage his symptoms. Each of the pharmaceuticals also runs the risk of losing its efficacy or having an effect that is undesirable; the result is that her family is caught in an ongoing therapeutic relationship with pharmaceutical treatment that is functionally unable to resolve their concerns while also putting them at risk of their eldest son's violent behaviors. Cheryl provides this synopsis of their experience of 2014:

> Last year was hell. We had so many horrific episodes of life threatening, impulsive behavior. It was scary and still is. That's when the big gun meds started being added. The old stabilizers along with anti-anxiety, stimulant meds as well as non-stimulants meds, mood stabilizers and meds to sleep. At this point we were on our third psychiatrist because we couldn't get a psychiatrist that was available by phone and didn't take months to get back in to see. Unfortunately, during all this time, the explosive and abusive behavior at home only increased. By his fourth hospitalization (if you count the partial in-patient as a hospitalization) we had run the gamut from just ADHD and anxiety all the way to a ton of meds that included strong mood stabilizers like Depakote and Geodon. And yet the relief we sought for our family never came.[51]

The "relief" that Cheryl seeks is elusive both because of the shifting terrain of her son's behaviors and the changing efficacy of the pharmaceuticals they use. As she narrates, they rely on drugs throughout the day to manage her son's attention and violence and they depend on sedatives at night to help him sleep. The added complication is that they are also bouncing between health care providers, their need for specialists and people who are accessible chafing against their access to

care as provided through employer-based health care in the US. The result is that they are suspended between what her son might benefit from (pharmaceutically and socially), what their family needs, and what health care providers can supply them with, from new prescriptions to hypotheses regarding their family's challenges. After a series of short hospitalizations for her son in order to manage his behaviors, Cheryl faces the possibility of needing to send him to a residential hospital for a longer stay.

Cheryl struggles with a decision that she has to make about her eldest son's possible institutionalization. On one side, she accepts the need to care for her child—ideally in the home—yet, she understands that it is impossible to care for him and her other children, herself, and her husband, while he is in the home. On the other side, she accepts that sending him for a longer stay in a residential hospital might allow for expert care, both in relation to figuring out what pharmaceuticals would benefit him as well as providing him with the social and emotional support that might help him develop skills to manage his emotions at home. She explains the decision in terms of "the pain we would all suffer by sending him away" and her experience of "lost hope," two phrases that index her experience of grief:

> [The therapist's] hope with possible residential treatment is that we can have an intervention of sorts and potentially catch him while he's still young and impressionable and teach him how to at least respect other humans and to use his energy for good rather than to hurt. In theory, that would be amazing and worth the pain we would all suffer by sending him away. But after years of doctors, therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, hospitals and the shittiest mental health system around, I have lost hope.[52]

In the following, she pairs her experience of grief with her eldest son's emotional life. Foremost among the emotions she perceives in her son are his experiences of "sadness" and "anger," which she narrates as "morphing" him into a different state; and she is changing apace.

> The therapist said it's time to revisit longer term residential. The thought makes my skin crawl. But I look at my lil bear and I see his sadness. I see his anger. I see him morphing into a person that is suffering. And my heart is breaking. Piece by fragile piece. And then, for the first time, my [older] son got angry at his little sister and screamed at her and when she responded by throwing [a] cup at him, he hit her. Hard enough to make her cry and he wasn't sorry, it was her fault. And in that moment, that relationship clearly changed, right before my eyes.[53]

For Cheryl, this is the moment where she accepts that her indecision about her son's care needs to change; she asks, implicitly "what would happen if he were to stay in the home?, what would happen if he were to leave?" The clear and unwavering threat to her daughter puts her connections into stark relief: she is unwilling to lose her daughter to the violence of her eldest son. She moves from a state of generalized despair about their family life and toward the possibility of mourning; mourning the son she will lose in his moving out of the home, mourning the violent relationship between her children, mourning the changes to the children who will stay at home. In committing to some kind of change for her son and her family, she is able to narrativize a series of possibilities through the imaginative play of the subjunctive, including changes in her relationships and emotional commitments.[54] None of them may be desirable, but to ensure the safety of her children, her partner and herself, the changes must be made. And it is in their inevitability that the subjunctive becomes palpable. The necessity of things changing reveals the constraints that make the subjunctive space of play possible.

Ultimately, what decision Cheryl and her family makes is unclear. The "This American Life" story occurred relatively early in their family story, and she kept the blog until October 2014. In her last posts, she discusses their family life and its positive sides, expressing her gratitude for her partner and their family. Whether they decide to seek treatment for her son in a residential hospital is unstated, but her movement of emphasis away from discussing her eldest son and their family's challenges toward an attention to the family and its importance

to her can be read as a working through of the subjunctive: she works to identify what is in danger of change through the perpetuation of their family system with the eldest child in the home. Whether or not he is eventually sent to a residential hospital, Cheryl is now squarely in the realm of the subjunctive, working through her mourning in the present as she anticipates what might change in the future—and what the future will bring about for her child and family. If she ultimately chooses to not send her child away, she accepts a future of suffering that will bring about its own inevitabilities, and which will be mourned in turn.

The challenge that Cheryl and her family face is that they are trapped in a generalized state of despair. They are unsure of any possible future, with no clear trajectory. The threats to their family are weighed against her eldest son's psychiatric concerns, which freeze Cheryl in her decision making. As they move from one expert to another, there continues to be no clear way forward; the psychiatrists and physicians they consult can only offer a shifting set of recommendations with no sense of the inevitable trajectory her eldest son's life is wedded to, nor any sense of how that will affect their family. And in the face of lack of clarity, Cheryl and her family are unsure what to do. Yet, when her eldest son attacks her daughter, the changes the family need to confront are exposed: they must find a way forward that protects their daughter from their son's actions. This is likely the solution that residential treatment provides, with its attendant challenges for their family. But with that solution in place, they are able to begin planning—they can speculate on what her son's move to another home will entail for their family and can grieve the changes this will bring about. Snapping out of despair—in this case—is predicated on an emergent event; what happens next depends on the choices that Cheryl and her family make, the connections they seek to maintain and animate, and the care they seek to give and receive.

Conservativism as Anti-Grief

When I started to work through "subjunctive grief" as a concept, I immediately hit a few quandaries. Working against ideas about loss in disability studies and invoking the subjunctive provided a way to focus on change without casting change as necessarily predicated on loss in the strict sense. This reconfiguration of loss drew me to consider how environmental degradation was beginning to influence some discussions; as the climate changes, species will disappear as will particular landscapes, consumed by the ocean, baked in the heat, or burned due to increasing forest fires.[55] The impending loss of animal life and changing landscapes might be seen as similarly informing calls to appreciate the world as it is and come to terms with the changes that are coming due to governmental and corporate inaction. I also started to think about "race suicide" and its history within eugenics; as a term, it was first popularized in the early twentieth century as a way to alarm white Protestants about the birthrate of Catholics, who were construed as displacing the former. It has more recently been adopted by white supremacists to talk about the growing number of nonwhites in the US, Canada, and throughout Europe. If subjunctive grief felt appropriate to consider attitudes about environmental change, it felt wrong when applied to racists. Instead, I started to think about Didier Fassin's discussion of *ressentiment* and resentment.[56] As Fassin recounts, for the political leadership in post-apartheid South Africa, a politics of *ressentiment* was vital, wherein the past and its harms can be acknowledged, which served as a means to articulate a shared future. In contrast, the politics of resentment framed the emergent experience of policing in France in the early 2000s. White police lashed out at members of immigrant and Black communities as an outgrowth of their anger about their sense of displacement at the heart of French society. Theirs was a rage borne of nostalgia for a racially pure past that never actually existed and an impossible mourning for something that never was and never will be. Rather than subjunctive grief for a changing social structure, they fueled racist acts through resentment born of

anger. This was presented—as many calls for a return to an imagined past are—as a response to loss; however, it was a performance of loss and grieving not intended to be resolved, but to stir up anger, hatred, denial, and violence. *Ressentiment*, alternatively, is kin to subjunctive grief, but it is weighed by the past; the subjunctive seeks to bring the future into the present, orienting perspectives toward the speculative rather than the historical. Where nostalgia might bar change or impose a future born of an imaginary past, the subjunctive invites change so as to create a space of speculative play that allows for coming to terms with the inevitable in a more liberatory fashion.

The work of subjunctive grief is to bring connections into relief. Doing so is not an uncomplicated process. Like Maynard and Diaz's confrontation with mortality through Maynard's cancer and terminal illness, or Cheryl's experience of love and kinship through her eldest son's violent behavior, it is often in periods of intensity that connections are made obvious and actionable. Yet, because of the trickery of grief, denial can operate in ways that obscure these connections. The result is that grief in the subjunctive becomes impossible because denial of change intercedes to interfere with the possibility of grief and the resolution that it can provide. Instead, individuals, families, and whole communities can become trapped in a state of despair, unable to accept what the future will bring, instead lashing out or retreating in the present. Maynard and Diaz are able to act in the present because they come to know the changes they face and seek ways to control those changes on their terms; Cheryl is trapped in her despair, faced with her feelings of love and obligation toward her children. It is only when she begins to confront the possibility of losing her daughter to the actions of her son that she shifts toward mourning. Tracing connections between people, people and things, people and institutions and environments, as people narrate change and its effects on their lives—particularly as it is expressed in their emotional connections—is a method of making the emergent actual. So often methodologies focus on what was. Orienting toward change, with all of the speculation it involves, has the potential to alter what critical methodologies might do, helping us reveal for

ourselves, and those we work with, the contours of our lives, the threats to them, and ways forward.

In these ways, affective methodologies might better describe the worlds we live in and the futures we imagine. In the days after Donald J. Trump's reelection to the US presidency in 2024, I found myself once again in despair for the future. Resurgent white supremacy now seemed like the least of the inevitable changes Americans faced: now he was to be joined with science and medicine skeptic, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and anti-labor, anti-regulatory, "free speech" proponent Elon Musk, while serving as a pawn for other corporate and authoritarian interests. I despaired for the lost opportunities to make meaningful climate change policies before even more radical changes to the environment might occur; I despaired at the likelihood of a misguided response to the next pandemic; the eroding protections for workers; the violence against immigrants; the list goes on. I despaired for my children, who would grow up in quickly eroding political and environmental landscapes. And then I realized that I had been in despair for all of 2023, with the Israeli assault on Palestinians, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the failures of the Biden administration to forward progressive legislation to protect women, workers, and marginalized communities. In that comparison I realized it was time to begin mourning; writing this is a first step in that process. There is no world of absolute justice, only justice-seeking; no liberation, only liberation-making. The subjunctive inspires the "would if we could" and its power lies in the collectivities that it makes possible and the spaces of play they enact. Rather than resist change because of the loss it evokes, as with nostalgic resentment, subjunctive grief allows for the possibility of working through affective attachments to a changing world, making way for a new collective reality that, if it is not just, inclusive, and equitable, is at least more just, more inclusive, and more equitable.

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What Should We Do with Our Depressions? Feelings, Biology, Politics

by Renata Prati | Aporias, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT The aim of this contribution is to explore some of the ways in which cultural studies, and more specifically affect studies and feminist new materialisms, have dealt with the problem of depression. My main argument is that, through these approaches and discussions, depression becomes a powerful site to delve into crucial controversies within affect theory and new materialisms, such as the distinction between affect and emotions and the related dichotomy between biology and culture, or the proper place of critique in contemporary thought. One glaring entry point to these controversies is the topic of antidepressants. In the 1990s, the so-called Decade of the Brain, a new generation of antidepressants took hold of the public imagination in the United States: the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, SSRIs, with Prozac (fluoxetine) on top. The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of both affect theory and new materialisms, and with them the shaping of some deep and enduring controversies. Indeed, almost twenty years later, these entangled debates were reenacted in two books: Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), originally prompted as a critical response to depression memoirs, and Elizabeth A. Wilson's *Gut Feminism* (2015), strongly critical of what she considers to be the usual critique of antidepressants in cultural studies. Are antidepressants taking us closer to the true psychosomatic nature of bad feelings, or are they an insidious form of biopower? How should cultural studies, feminist, and queer work approach them? What do they say about depression and negative feelings in general? Are our feelings of distress mainly visceral and biological, or are they socially and culturally determined, or both? And how? How do the 1990s and 2010s controversies live on today?

KEYWORDS affect theory, antidepressants, depression, mental health, new materialism, stuckness

"Our bellies have never been more put to the test." This is, roughly and quite literally translated, what I read every time I went to take the subway during the last

stressful weeks of 2023—in a billboard for Buscapina, an over-the-counter medication for abdominal pain and cramps that promises to "get rid of spasms." "Stressful" is a huge understatement here, but it is simply too hard to describe the sheer amount of disorientation, uncertainty, worry, and grief that affected pretty much everyone I knew in the face of that November's presidential elections in Argentina, my country, which put a far-right media personality in power (whom I also find hard to describe, by the way). But I doubt the ad meant to draw a connection to the political circumstances, at least not explicitly. I look into it now and find that, under the title "Stories Based on True Bellyaches," the campaign featured different characters, each with a different bellyache story: two out of three have a clear-cut emotional background. I also learn that it grew out of a previous campaign, which pivoted on the national emotions during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, feelings of nervousness and anxiety then, yes, but also of relief, euphoria, national pride, and cohesion. If anything, football seems to be the most patent reference here, not politics—still, I don't think they tried to dispel the association either. "We are always put to the test in Argentina," stated Buscapina's regional brand manager.[1]

Andrew Lakoff argued, in his study of antianxiety and antidepressant medication campaigns in Argentina during the 2001 crisis, that national pharmaceutical companies were quick to harness social explanations of distress: "The social analysis of psychopharmaceutical sales patterns was almost second nature to market strategists."[2] Argentine companies knew well, still do, how to turn pain into profit without denying its public, political nature. Yet, the Buscapina line also rings true. Why deny that stress, social stress too, affects our bodies, our guts? And then, a while later, I posted a picture of the ad on my social media because I had a paper published in which, among other things, I drew on Lakoff's arguments to discuss the political nature of depression.[3] A stranger, presumably annoyed, saw fit to ask: "You didn't have spasms before?" I have felt bad before, sure. It's not my first day on Earth. I never meant to say that the total sum of our feelings of distress was Javier Milei's fault, as I would not say that the total sum of

depression and anxiety diagnosis, which rose fast here in the first few months of the pandemic,[4] were all directly the fault of COVID-19. But does that negate the quite obvious political dimensions of these particular feelings of distress?

Depression is uncomfortable—this is of course another huge understatement. First of all, depression is uncomfortable because it is so evidently painful. It is part of the definition: depression hurts, a lot, and in a quite particular way. It can feel like being helplessly stuck, where you "simply cannot see where there is to get to," as Sylvia Plath once put it.[5] I've been feeling a lot of this lately, politically, and I bet I'm not alone. But maybe part of this felt negativity also derives from added layers of discomfort. While we talk more and more about mental health in general and about depression in particular—about depression rates, about depression treatments, about depression stories—none of those talks is either casual nor straightforward. We would like to think all stigma is over, that mental health issues are out of the closet now, for good. But these feelings are still hard to deal with, as are the issues that revolve around them. Depression is not only the site of fathomless suffering, but the subject of heated debates, and the two may not be wholly unrelated.

Here I want to focus on the recurring tensions between biology and politics in the realm of feelings of distress, revisiting some crucial controversies of the deeply intertwined affective, material, and reparative turns through the lens of depression. While one of the crucial drives of affect theory and new materialism has been a certain sense of enthusiasm (about the capacities of affect, the vitality of matter, the promises of reparative reading),[6] these fields are no stranger to controversy, to feeling stuck, even to depression. Indeed, they emerged as such in the 1990s, during a time of heightened attention to depression and antidepressants. And, when decades later they turned more fully to a discussion of depression, they did so largely along the lines of those earlier divides, such as hotly contested issues surrounding diagnostic trends or antidepressants' efficacy and safety, or the questions of whether depression belongs to the body or to

politics, to matter or to language, to the realm of affect and individual experience or to that of power and public structures of inequality and oppression. In this essay, my main goal is to historicize these tensions, foregrounding their connections to wider debates on depression, in order to dwell on how they may affect our current public feelings of despair. Over the past three decades, within affect theory, new materialism, and in the public sphere, depression has become an arena in which to gather,[7] although not always politely (arenas are, after all, sites of struggle). It has been a crucible of many different conflicts, and maybe this is partly why we got stuck in them for so long. Getting stuck is sure uncomfortable, even painful, but—is that always only a bad thing?

Prozac Wars: Biology versus Language

Let's go back to the 1990s, where it all began. And, by all, I mean mainly affect theory—at least in its current incarnation (we know people have been thinking about feelings ever since the dawn of thinking and feeling)—but also debates around depression, antidepressants, and the role of science and Big Pharma in matters of feeling and distress. Because, more broadly, the 1990s were also the so-called Decade of the Brain, of the Prozac boom and the Prozac wars. Along with a steep rise in depression diagnoses and antidepressant prescriptions, there was a burst in popular representations and controversies, which were instrumental in cementing depression's definition and status as a common mental disorder.[8] And this was the backdrop against which some of the most seminal essays of the affective turn were published, like Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" (1995), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" (1995).[9] Depression debates, that is, informed this turn to affect. To be sure, public and scholarly discussions have different frames, tones, and aftermaths, and should not be collapsed into one another. Still, they are not isolated—no scholar is an island.

In fact, the tensions between biology and language that so inform the foundational texts of affect theory resonate strongly with those wider controversies. Each in their own way, both Massumi and Sedgwick and Frank argued that a turn to affect should imply turning away from the lessons of the linguistic turn to embrace the biology of the body. In a review essay, also published in 1995, on three of the Prozac best-sellers of the time,[10] Judith Kegan Gardiner outlined a compelling scene, one that probably would not strike as too strange even today, which speaks volumes about this resonance. A group of women attend a feminist conference: In the panels, they discuss the socially constructed nature of gender, identities, and ways of being, while during coffee breaks they exchange data and impressions about their use of Prozac and other related drugs, in a way that belies "a view of personality as biochemically influenced."[11] Through this story, Gardiner pointed out the seeming contradiction between private uses and public stances, which she ultimately saw as symptomatic for a wider "ambivalence about biology and social constructionism."[12]

It is hard to deny that there is a certain feminist established common sense—and maybe also within the humanities more widely—according to which the crucial intervention is to show that what *seems* natural is *actually* not. Our genes, our hormones, our brain chemistry are not the problem—it is the world that is unjust, unbalanced, and broken. This is an important, hard-won lesson, which unfortunately still bears reminding. But it is also too simple, when taken by itself. And, it seems fairly safe to venture, it was precisely the flagrant but often unnoticed bifurcation so vividly portrayed in Gardiner's story that motivated Massumi's or Sedgwick and Frank's passionate arguments. There is more to biology than meets the eye, they argued—somewhat paradoxically, since the critique of anti-biologism was regularly paired with a disavowal of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," a critique of critique.[13] Or, better yet, there is more to biology than words can tell. Biology and affect are before or beyond language, and cultural studies needs to stop being wary of that: we should be able to listen

more openly to the intensities, textures, moods, and agencies of biology and affect, instead of making them fit in the same old tired boxes of language, culture, or power.

Although depressive affects would be the exact opposite of the exciting picture of affect as transgressive, unassimilable, unpredictable intensity, affect theory and mainstream psychiatry were, all of a sudden, strangely in tune in their call to biology. How should we understand this eerie alliance? Of course, I do not mean to simply equate them. For example, I do not believe Sedgwick ever meant to simply pathologize depression, like Peter Kramer very unequivocally and influentially did.[14] She wanted to learn from depression, to make room for it: the opposite of paranoid reading is not a chirpy, happy-go-lucky one, but a practice inspired by Melanie Klein's depressive position.[15] Nevertheless, this turn to affect and to biology was also boosted and shaped by those very public and very polarized Prozac wars—which might mean, for instance, that behind or beneath or even nurturing its calls for a more reparative and capacious way of thinking were also the lust of battle, the moral weight of dichotomies, the power and appeal of conflict. And, through controversy, the divide between biology and politics was mostly reinforced, not dissolved.

Prozac Wars, Round 2

Some twenty years later, affect theory and new materialism went back to discussing depression, this time in book-length form, and again, thorny issues about the biological or cultural nature of our feelings came right up. The context was very different, though. Regarding antidepressants and the medical model of depression, the zeitgeist was no longer belligerent. Even in feminist contexts, skepticism had given way to a more musical-comedy attitude of acceptance, as in the catchy tune of the television series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–2019): "Antidepressants are *so* not a big deal!"

This shift in tone is actually featured in Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), given that the book chronicles her descent into depression twenty years prior, while finishing her dissertation, entering the job market, and writing her first book—aptly titled *Mixed Feelings* (1992, and featured, incidentally, in Sedgwick and Frank's essay as a glaring example of the "reflexive antibiologism" of theory).[16] Sometime in the two intervening decades, Cvetkovich drafted what she called her "Depression Manifesto": "This is my version of a Prozac memoir, bad connotations included. But I want to write it because I don't believe in Prozac."[17] There she dubbed it a "scam," "trivial," a "drug that masks the symptoms of a response to a fucked-up world"—but then she moved on. The manifesto lines are cited in the book as testimony of a past time, an earlier voice, but are distinct from the book's argument, and she clarifies right away: "I'm not against pharmaceuticals for those who find they work."[18] In fact, the memoir describes and acknowledges the effects that antidepressants had on her, even if she is determined not to make too much of it. She does not need to be either for or against Prozac to make her case: that depression is a public feeling, an entry point to "how capitalism feels."[19] The book grew out of an anti-Prozac rant, but it also outgrew that rant.

This is not acknowledged in Elizabeth A. Wilson's *Gut Feminism* (2015). She is plainly dismissive of Cvetkovich's book on depression, retelling Gardiner's anecdote to argue for a "mismatch" between critique (which she quite problematically equates with anti-psychiatric critique) and "the post-Prozac landscape,"[20] without stopping to ponder over the fact that two whole decades elapsed since Gardiner's text. Her central claim is that depression is visceral, and that feminist and cultural critics such as Cvetkovich, routinely worried about oppression and capitalism, have ignored that. Wilson picks up the Sedgwickian argument against anti-biologism by the letter, but she clearly drops Sedgwick's call to a more reparative mode of arguing.[21] That is, *Gut Feminism* addresses depression to wrestle biology from the anti-biologism of theory and feminism, but *also* to explicitly defend the role of negativity and aggression in theory and

feminism. The critique of critique, however, still comes in handy to dismiss all criticism of antidepressants and the potential errors and abuses of the pharmaceutical industry.[22]

While the clash between Cvetkovich's and Wilson's books seems at first glance to replay the 1990s controversies that pitched biology and language, materiality and critique, body and power, these binaries tend to unravel on a closer look. It is not only that Wilson uncouples her defense of biology from the call to reparative reading, at least partially. Cvetkovich is also much more attentive to the embodied experience of depression than what Wilson grants her: bodily experiences, even pharmacologically mediated, are crucial in her discussion of what depression feels like, as they are in her lengthy account of the everyday habits that allow her to navigate and overcome depression, such as swimming, dancing, and crafting. In this, actually, Cvetkovich's attunement to the embodied experience of depression is perhaps even keener than Wilson's, whose arguments often depend on cultural and linguistic matters, like her discussion of bitterness and "biliousness" in abdominal migraine in children or in melancholy and depression.[23] Crucially, the "data" about serotonin's role in depression Wilson claims to take "seriously, but not literally" are in fact not at all firmly established,[24] so she ultimately uses them not literally but rather literarily, as suggestive ideas, but not as access to some real, material world.

More troublingly, perhaps, Wilson's approach to depression can seem at times even instrumental, weirdly insensitive to the suffering it entails. This is particularly apparent in the second half of the book, devoted to antidepressants, where she seems to care more about what the body does to the drug than the other way around.[25] Her final chapter opens with a discussion of the relationship between antidepressants and increased suicide rates in children and adolescents, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *pharmakon* to argue for the ultimate impossibility to dissociate the bad from the good, poison from cure. Through it all, the gravity of the subject seems forgotten. But as I see it, Derrida's *pharmakon* was never about

indifference to suffering; the fact that violence is unavoidable does not mean we should not strive tirelessly for an economy of violence as just as possible, and beyond. Tellingly missing from Wilson's approach to antidepressants are their *felt* effects (which, as I mentioned, do show up in Cvetkovich's memoir). She faults "conventional" critiques of antidepressants with "insensitivity to the materiality at hand,"[26] but what about the people who take them?

After clarifying her stance towards antidepressants, Cvetkovich specified: "I do, though, want to complicate biology as the endpoint for both explanations and solutions."[27] Wilson's book could be seen to do this exact same thing: her aim is to show that "biology is not a synonym for determinism," that "nothing is comprehensible in purely biological terms—especially not biology itself."[28] It's true, the path Cvetkovich chooses to "complicate biology" does turn away from the life sciences, like Wilson chides her,[29] but not from all bodily matters. In turn, Wilson's way of approaching the "data" doggedly sidelines cultural, social, historical, political, and epistemological discussions, all of which continue to be essential for depression and antidepressants. In any case, we do need a better, fuller engagement with the body and the life sciences. And maybe, taken together instead of apart, both their insights as well as their limitations could help us find the way—after all, they are both trying to overcome what they see as a confounding, hurtful divide. Ultimately, from different angles, both Cvetkovich and Wilson show the powerful entanglements of biology and politics and of matter and language in the problem of depression.[30] Depression is, then, *both* a gut feeling *and* a public feeling. That there are so many routes to this entanglement only makes it matter more.

On Being Stuck (Still)

But clearly just saying this—depression is both visceral and public, both biological and political—does not make the problem go away. Issues of medicalization of

distress or the efficacy, safety, and mechanisms of antidepressants are still hotly contested.[31] Moreover, if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that our mental health is highly attuned to the world, but also that biological issues are deeply embedded in political matters. Actually, these lessons are not new. "This chestnut in the fire of contemporary discourse is the easiest to crack," wrote Gardiner almost thirty years ago, "but only to make the simplest puree."[32] Why then is depression so compelling, so prone to controversy, still? Why are the questions it poses so difficult to solve, but also to dismiss?

Evelyn Fox Keller's *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture* tackled a similar conundrum: if we already know the divide between nature and nurture is a false one, why do we keep coming back to it? There's the history of the dichotomy, sure, and yet exposing it fails to undo the charm. (Historicism and critique, in other words, fall short.) What keeps the debate alive, Keller suggested, is that it "does seem to capture a number of issues that many people want to know about,"[33] issues regarding the fixity or plasticity of human nature. So we need to change the question to one that makes sense, yes, but unless we reckon with those concerns, the mirage that promises to soothe them will keep showing up.

On that note, I would like to end on the suggestion that depression matters so much, both in its confusing entanglements of mind and body and in its polemical nature, because it brings to the fore important issues of agency and, in particular, of blocked agency.[34] This is after all what depression is all about, the intractable feeling of being stuck. Ultimately, of course, this is also the main allure of antidepressants, their promise to get you out of bed in the morning, regardless of all of the other factors—personal, political—that keep getting you stuck: "Depression hurts" was Eli Lilly's crucial tagline, followed by "Prozac can help."[35] The Public Feelings project captured this well through their idea of political depression, which is, "the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change

the world or to make us feel better."[36] But this particular branch of desperation, which by the way is still alive and well,[37] is also what the turn to biology was responding to.[38] This was, for instance, the motivation behind two of Sedgwick's major interventions: her argument to overcome paranoia came from her grappling with a perceived impasse in AIDS activism,[39] and her case for an approach to biology was spurred by a desire to think about negative affects in a less negative, oppressive way.[40]

But does this really help? Does a turn to biology actually foster, widen, or free up agency for negative feelings? On the one hand, alas, I think it is rather a trap. Biological approaches to depression do not tend to destabilize the negative understanding of it, quite the opposite. The life sciences routinely pathologize depression, and they mostly do so in an overtly reifying way, by turning depression into a *stable* entity.[41] So whatever power this approach affords, it has nothing to do with a potency of affect, much less of depressive affects, which are seen as always and only negative, disordered, and private. Rather, I think, the efficacy of appealing to biology comes from biology's authoritative place—something particularly evident in the whole Prozac affair. Whatever their "real" effects and their chemical workings might be (and let us remember, again, that neither is firmly established nor understood) the success of antidepressants constitutes a blatant example not only of the powers of marketing, but more specifically of the allure of the scientific discourses the marketing strategies relied and rely on.[42] I am not saying this makes them fake or useless, and I am also not saying that those powers can't be used in strategic, devious ways. (For instance, the Feel Tank Chicago's slogan "Depressed? It might be political," pivoted crucially on the rhetoric of pharmaceutical advertising.) All I am saying is we should be aware of and alert to where pharmaceuticals' power comes from—in using that power, we may also reinforce it.

On the other hand, however, I also feel these arguments, through their blockages and perhaps even in their most hotly confrontational moments, are in fact leading

somewhere. Depression is uncomfortable, and the controversies deepen the discomfort—but we can learn from this. This is, as Clare Hemmings reminded us, one of the lessons of standpoint feminism: "critical knowledge is accessed through the feeling of *ill fit*."[43] Feeling stuck, staying with the trouble, not knowing where there is to get to—all different ways of describing *aporias*, by the way, the Greek word for a lack of paths—can sometimes be instructive experiences. I don't mean to simply valorize the relentless negativity of depression, as if it could be turned into something productive, purposeful, or positive.[44] There is a certain intrinsic negativity to depression that should be acknowledged. Depression hurts, yes. A lot. It can hurt even more when we try to shun it; when we add unfair and unnecessary negativities to that intrinsic one. And maybe, to avoid this, the turn to biology could be helpful, insofar as it points to the complicated, entangled, widespread ways in which agency is distributed.

There is no easy, ready formula to get out of bed, nor to change the world. What is certain, though, is that sheer will alone will not do. If the customary forms of agency are not working anymore, maybe it's because they never really did. And, to reinvent them, we might need to let go of the false choice between biology and politics, which need not be understood as mutually exclusive. Depression might be a way in which society gets under our skin, a way in which we bodily and affectively register, digest, and even resist what the world puts on us. And pills can have a social life too, not only as discourse and cultural circulation, but also in terms of the ways in which they are experienced and the material, felt effects they produce. To reinvent agency, we might need to embrace and foster ties more openly with very disparate actors and things and forces, both in the realm of "culture" and of "nature," some of which may not always be easy to understand or to live with. And we might even need our depressions—even in, or for, the inescapable vulnerability, awkwardness, and negativity they entail.

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Notes

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11. Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Review: Can Ms. Prozac Talk Back? Feminism, Drugs, and Social Constructionism," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 3 (1995): 501, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178196 < https://doi.org/10.2307/3178196> .

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14. See Peter Kramer, *Against Depression* (Viking, 2005).

15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," in *Novel Gazing*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Duke University Press, 1997), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382478-001 < https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382478-001> ; see also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Teaching/Depression," *The Scholar and the Feminist Online* 4, no. 2 (2006), https://sfonline.barnard.edu/heilbrun/sedgwick_01.htm.

16. Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 16. Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings* was published in 1992.

17. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Duke University Press, 2012), 15.

18. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 16.

19. Ibid., 11.

20. Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2015), 11–12.

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22. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 12.

23. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 16, 70.

24. Ibid., 13; on serotonin's role in depression see, for example, David Healy, "Serotonin and Depression," *BMJ* 350, (2015), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h1771 < https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h1771> .

25. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 98–99.

26. Ibid., 104.

27. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 16.

28. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 9, 27.

29. Ibid., 192.

30. Indeed, there is exciting recent work on depression that draws on both of them, regardless of their conflicts. See Sarah Brown, "Post-Pharma Pedagogies: An Intertextual Feminist Approach to Teaching Depression in *The Bell Jar*," *Women's Studies* 48, no. 3 (2019): 207–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1593836 < https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1593836> ; Simone Fullagar, Wendy O'Brien, and Adele Pavlidis, *Feminism and a Vital Politics of Depression and Recovery* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Jacinthe Flore, Renata Kokanović, Cameron Duff, and Felicity Callard, "The Antidepressant in Women's Lifeworlds: Feminist Materialist Encounters," *BioSocieties* 16, no. 2 (2021): 177–95, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-020-00189-2 < https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-020-00189-2> .

31. For an overview, see Awais Aftab, "The Case for Antidepressants in 2022," *Psychiatry at the Margins*, November 20, 2022, https://awaisaftab.substack.com/p/the-case-for-antidepressants-in-2022 < https://awaisaftab.substack.com/p/the-case-for-antidepressants-in-2022> .

32. Gardiner, "Can Ms. Prozac Talk Back?," 512.

33. Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture* (Duke University Press, 2010), 73. ↩

34. For a recent discussion of negative feelings that also highlights issues of agency, see Thomas Dekeyser, Vickie Zhang, and David Bissell, "What Should We Do with Bad Feelings? Negative Affects, Impotential Responses," *Progress in Human Geography* 48, no. 2 (2024): 190–205, https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231213513 < https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231213513> . For work on the importance of taking materiality into account in contemporary political discussions, see Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Things of Order: Affect, Material Culture, Dispositif," *Cultural Critique* 124, no. 1 (2024): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2024.a926818 < https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2024.a926818> . It is worth noting that in the past few years there has been an expansion of the vocabulary for negative feelings, both in affect theory and new materialism as in the public sphere. This is, to me, a very positive development—I argued elsewhere against the "monoculture" of depression and its global imposition; see Renata Prati, "Palabras para el dolor: legibilidad, traducción, poder," *Anacronismo e Irrupción* 14, no. 26 (2024). However, I believe depression remains a vital category, and that it is still necessary to reckon with the history of its controversies. In addition, the shift need not be understood as discontinuity, given that Sedgwick, Wilson, and Cvetkovich all approached depression as a keyword for something wider, such as negative affects, negativity, and political despair. ↩

35. This was the headline of Prozac's first direct-to-consumer advertising campaign, in 1997. For further references see Stuart Elliott, "A New Campaign by Leo Burnett Will Try to Promote Prozac Directly to Consumers," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/01/business/a-new-campaign-by-leo-burnett-will-try-to-promote-prozac-directly-to-consumers.html < https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/01/business/a-new-campaign-by-leo-burnett-will-try-to-promote-prozac-directly-to-consumers.html> . ↩

36. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 1. ↩

37. See, for instance, Jules Gill-Peterson, "Gender Fear," *The Baffler,* April 2, 2024, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/gender-fear-gill-peterson < https://thebaffler.com/salvos/gender-fear-gill-peterson> . ↩

38. Brigitte Bargetz, "Longing for Agency: New Materialisms' Wrestling with Despair," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 26, no. 2 (2019): 181–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818802474 < https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818802474> . ↩

39. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 3–4. ↩

40. Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 4. ↩

41. Til Wykes and Felicity Callard, "Diagnosis, Diagnosis, Diagnosis: Towards DSM-5," *Journal of Mental Health* 19, no. 4 (2010): 303,

https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2010.494189 < https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2010.494189> .

42. Deena Skolnick Weisberg, Frank C. Keil, Joshua Goodstein, Elizabeth Rawson, and Jeremy R. Gray, "The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 20, no. 3 (2008): 470–77, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2008.20040 < https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2008.20040> .

43. Clare Hemmings, "Affect and Feminist Methodology, Or What Does It Mean to Be Moved?," in *Structures of Feeling*, ed. Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (De Gruyter, 2015), 154, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110365481.147 < https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110365481.147> . Emphasis in original.

44. This was also one of Wilson's complaints against Cvetkovich; see Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 6, 86. I am not sure Wilson does that either, though—to me, she mostly dodges depression's negativity.

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The Spectre of Antisemitism

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ABSTRACT In this essay, I argue that the rhetoric behind "not in my name" actually mobilizes the same gesture as the popular Zionist move to innocence. While anti-Zionist Jews preface our solidarity with Palestine through an account of our own experience with suffering and persecution, so too does the Zionist Jew put that same suffering to use, albeit to opposite means. In other words, there is a fine line between the rhetorical purpose of anti-Zionists' saying that genocide is not a Jewish value and Zionists' using this same rhetoric to label Israeli violence as self-defense and not genocide. In fact, it is not a stretch to suggest that anti-Zionism's re-emphasis on Jewish values as the means by which we validate Palestinian struggle is not a stand against Jewish supremacy but rather an appeal for it.

KEYWORDS Israel, Palestine, Zionism, antisemitism, liberation, philosemitism

Since October 7, 2023, there has been a proliferation of Jews on the left speaking out against the state of Israel. Anti-Zionist Jews holding signs that read "not in my name" dominate representations of pro-Palestinian discourse, while organizations like *If Not Now*, *Jews Say No to Genocide*, *Independent Jewish Voices*, and *Jewish Voices for Peace* grow in strength and support. Exposing Zionism for what it is—a genocidal campaign against Palestinian life in the name of colonial racial capitalism—these Jewish activists, many of whom explicitly call themselves anti-Zionist, draw an important distinction between Zionism and Jewishness, hence the name "anti-Zionist Jew." One of their primary aims is to delegitimize Israel's argument that Jewish safety is incompatible with Palestinian life and refuse Israel's co-optation of antisemitism, which has been used to justify over seventy-

five years of gratuitous violence. To make this claim, these activists often draw equivalences. Varied histories of Jewish experience are subsumed into a singular narrative of Jewish suffering and persecution through which we might all recognize our moral and political commitments to Palestinian liberation. How could I sit by and watch the extermination of Palestinian life when *my* people have been defined by genocide too? How could the Israeli state use *my Jewishness* to justify such unspeakable violences when it is *my* Jewishness that informs why I always side with the oppressed? Israel, we argue, does not represent Jewish identity! *Not in my name,* we chant! But whose name are we trying to protect and at what cost are we willing to protect it?

In this essay, I tease out a tension that lies at the core of anti-Zionist Jewish discourse. By situating anti-Zionism in the same gesture as the Zionist move to innocence that is used to justify Israel's ongoing assault on Palestine, I show that there is only a fine line separating the rhetorical purpose of anti-Zionists saying that genocide is not a Jewish value and Zionists' using this same rhetoric to label Israeli violence as self-defense and not genocide.[1] In fact, I contend that it is not a stretch to suggest that the Jewish anti-Zionist's re-emphasis of Jewish values as the means by which we validate Palestinian struggle is not a stand against Jewish supremacy but rather an appeal for it.[2] As Anna Rajagopal argues, to postulate "a grand mythos of undefinable values that seek to valorize [Jewishness][3] as being inherently moral, disconnected, or above the violence being enacted in Palestine" is to simultaneously obfuscate from a much more sinister truth: "that [Jewishness] has been adapted to be a functional vehicle for this violence."[4] Every time the anti-Zionist Jew praises Jewish values and suffering as *the* premise for solidarity with Palestinians, we have, whether consciously or otherwise, chosen "a moral high ground" that is more concerned with distancing Jewishness from "affiliation with colonialism" than constructing a political program equipped to confront the reality that "nearly every single Jewish institution materially endorses and funds genocide in Palestine."[5] While this move might appear pragmatic on the surface, I draw attention to its limits. By arresting

anti-Zionist Jewish discourse in some of the same logics as Zionism, anti-Zionism limits itself from realizing the full extent of its stated goals. More specifically, by uncritically prefacing our solidarity with Palestine through an account of our own experience with suffering and persecution, I demonstrate that anti-Zionist Jewish discourse is easily co-opted by Zionist Jewish discourse.

Subsequently, the main question orienting this piece is whether or not the anti-Zionist Jewish commitment to "an exodus from Zionism" alone (as Naomi Klein put it during Passover)—without reckoning simultaneously with Jewishness writ large– can contribute to dismantling the state of Israel in support of Palestinian liberation[6] My worry is that it cannot. What I will argue is that at the heart of Israel's move to innocence is not only Zionism but also prevailing constructions of Jewishness. I identify a line of continuity instead of an opposition, between Jewish Zionism and Jewish anti-Zionism. This isn't to suggest that you cannot be both Jewish and an anti-Zionist, but rather to draw a direct line of connection between a belief in the fundamental (and exceptional) oppression of Jews and the grief machine that Israel uses to justify the theft and destruction of Palestinian land and life; these two things cannot be thought of as distinct.[7] If anti-Zionism, generally understood, is to be in opposition to the state of Israel, but it is simultaneously Jewishness (and Jewish persecution in particular) that provides Zionism with its foundational justification, then the beginning of the statement "I am an anti-Zionist" is in tension with the end of the statement "Jew." I suggest that this tension is not an aberration or an anomaly of Jewish anti-Zionism, but rather, constitutive of a Jewish politics that even in its opposition to the state of Israel remains invested in claims to victimhood that feed the ontology of innocence used to strengthen Israel's raison d'être.[8]

The History of Jewish Innocence

Ussama Makdisi has identified three historical bases that underpin the strength of Jewish innocence: 1) the material operation of the Zionist project; 2) the presence of Orientalism; and 3) the philosemitic turn.[9] For my purposes, I focus in particular on the rise and function of philosemitism, a term used to connote not simply "love for Jews" but an overall support and identification with Jews that came out of Europe post-World War I and proliferated after World War II. The turn to the philosemitic, especially as it relates to antisemitism as its constitutive opposite, produces the condition of possibility for prevailing constructions of Jewishness to function (whether intentionally or not) in service of the (settler)colonial project both in the West and in Palestine.

Integral to the Western world's quest to rehabilitate itself from the stain of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century was the philosemitic turn, which, at least on the surface, meant a radical departure from the oppression Jews had been subject to across Europe for the last two thousand years. This period of intense modernization and democratization led to the gradual emancipation and assimilation of Jews, enabling a small but steadily increasing population of European Jews to begin planning a Jewish ethnonational state in Palestine.[10] Influenced partly by the global rise of nationalism and partly by a long history of Jewish persecution across Europe, these initial Zionist's erected the first Zionist colony, Rishon LeZion, in 1882.[11] At the same time that Europe was trying to shed its history of racial antisemitism through a commitment to its constitutive opposite, philosemitism, Zionism was beginning to theorize a political project of "implanting and sustaining an exclusively Jewish nationalist state in multireligious Palestine" in response to the history of racial antisemitism that Europe was trying to erase.[12] On the surface, these two projects were fundamentally at odds; Europe was in a rush to cover up the racist past that Zionism had been wielding to justify a Jewish nation state.[13]

Further complicating matters, Jewish emancipation in Europe was violently interrupted by the rise of the Third Reich, an atrocity incalculable for European Jews, but divergently felt by Jews outside of Europe, largely due to proximity, both physical and cultural to those who were murdered in the gas chambers. Those who made it out of Europe and into Palestine before the Holocaust began did not face the same hostility.[14] As Mary Turfah outlines, from the late 1930s onwards, British control of Palestine functioned in service of Zionism at the expense of Palestinians, for example by supplying Zionist militias with the weapons and military power "required to seize the land."[15] This marked the beginning of a paradoxical relationship between European Jews and non-Jewish Europeans that was simultaneously symbiotic and antagonistic. To some extent, it is the nature of this paradoxical relationship that produced an environment where Jews could gain enough power across Europe to colonize Palestine, yet still be powerless enough to be executed by those same Europeans who had recently extended them rights and freedoms.

To consolidate these competing forces into a politics that benefited Zionist ideology, early Zionists saw the Ashkenazi[16] Jewish experience as a particularly comprehensible way to justify statehood. This was especially true after the Shoah: the events of the Holocaust became yet another example of the gratuitous violence Jews would inevitably face when trying to integrate into European society (so the Zionist story goes). Strained integration in Europe helpfully reinforced the desire for the Zionist alternative, an alternative that culminated in the first Nakba of 1948 that led to the creation of Israel.[17] Zionism has thus always profited from the same structures it claims to be resisting, a contradiction that forms the basis of Israel's so-called "right to exist." At least in part, this is because Zionism has always been a colonial racial capitalist project as well as a (settler)colonial project, even though it has advertised itself as an exodus of the oppressed.[18] Zionists, Makdisi explains, might have been forced to grapple with racial antisemitism in Europe, but "they also expressed, shared, contributed to,

and circulated many of the foundational racist tropes of nineteenth-century Western culture."[19]

Before the Holocaust, for example, Zionism offered Europe, especially Tsarist Russia, with a way to minimize some of its Jewish population without having to do all the work themselves. Similarly, during the Holocaust, despite the mass extermination of Jews across Europe, British colonial forces were supporting Zionist Jews in Palestine, allowing at least some European countries a place to point at to alleviate responsibility, all the while advancing their own imperial interests in the Middle East. Following the Holocaust, support for Jews grew, specifically in relation to Zionism, as it allowed Europe to atone for its sins and demonstrate a commitment to the Jewish people, while continuing to advance imperial interests.[20] Subsequently, from the twentieth century onwards, whether intentionally or otherwise, the Ashkenazi Jewish subject became the perfect conduit for what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have identified as "a series of *moves to innocence*" which were adopted by both Europe and Zionism in an "attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity" while nonetheless advancing their own (settler)colonial and imperial interests.[21] Ultimately, Zionism's success is due to the ease by which the Ashkenazi Jewish subject was subsumed into whiteness, while at the same time maintaining the position of antisemitism as a core Jewish experience.

It is in this way that all claims to Jewish victimhood get implicated in Israel's narrative of innocence. Jewish victimhood, the Zionists have always understood, can be exploited in such a way so that it not only coincides with but is also conducive to its opposite, i.e., Jewish power. Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of Zionism, for example, identified antisemitism as creating the "requisite impetus" for Jews to embark on an exodus to Israel.[22] Em Cohen underscores Herzl's logic in "Jewish Fear in a Zionist Unreality," outlining how antisemitic countries have always been the greatest allies to the Zionist cause since they play an integral role in motivating Jews to leave Europe.[23] Underpinning the success of

the Zionist occupation of Palestine, then, is both the philosemitic turn and paradoxically its antithesis: the spectre of antisemitism, which must remain present enough that the West can continue to use it as a shield to hide behind (philosemitism is only meaningful if the threat of antisemitism looms nonetheless), and Israel can continue to use it as the "requisite impetus" for Jews to leave the West for the "Promised Land."[24] In other words, regardless of how many gains Jews have made since the twentieth century, the fantasy of antisemitism's omnipotence remains a foundational justification for Zionism.

Zionism is thus both the thing that produces, as well as the primary way to respond to, the predetermination of Jewish victimhood, which is why we cannot understand the state of Israel outside the function of what I call the spectre of antisemitism. I use the language of spectre here to emphasize how the charge of antisemitism does not exist in a vacuum but rather is haunted by the history I have outlined above. Israel is not a response to, but, as Fred Moten puts it, an artifact of, antisemitism.[25] When we incite the charge of antisemitism today, we are using it in the context of a history that, for all intents and purposes, has inverted the meaning of antisemitism. For Esther Romeyn (2020), this history has brought about a literal shift in its meaning. She writes that from the 1970s onwards antisemitism went from a classic strain of antisemitism, "associated traditionally with a biological race concept, prejudice against Jews and the far right" towards a new form of antisemitism, "which expressed itself as animus against Israel and insensitivity and indifference to Jewish concerns."[26] Romeyn's intervention is an important elaboration on the context surrounding what I am calling antisemitism's spectre, but I take issue with central aspects of her work: 1) her consistent use of the term Israel-Palestine conflict (a problem that I explore in more depth later in this piece); and 2) the way her work continues to essentialize and exceptionalise antisemitism as something that needs renewed attention today. For Romeyn, antisemitism's historical shift has "resulted in the forgetting of different histories of racism and racialization, such as the racialization of religion, and of Judaism and Islam in particular" and thus renewed attention to questions of antisemitism

in contemporary theories of race and racism is needed.[27] But I am not interested in rethinking antisemitism through contemporary theories of race that would suggest Judaism is racialized akin to Islam. As my project here endeavors to argue, antisemitism is a spectre that maintains its legitimacy through continuing to prioritize an exceptional place for Jews as uniquely persecuted, at the expense of Palestinians, which includes drawing equivalences between Jewish persecution and Muslim persecution. Against Romeyn's project, I identify antisemitism as a spectre so as to put the entire qualification in crisis. Speaking out against antisemitism is to speak about it in the inverse: what once was a concept used to refer to a structural condition of domination affecting Jewish people has now become primarily a spectral presence that legitimates those same structures (structures that now tend to work in service of Jews rather than against). Reinforcing this is the very real power that Israel, with its ties to racial colonial capitalism, has brought Jewish identity writ large.

Alana Lentin has described this as the "political utility of antisemitism" which is used today "not to illuminate the operations of race, but rather to obscure them," often in the name of whiteness.[28] Take for example the practice of Mizrahi-washing by the Israeli government, a practice that has accelerated over the last decade in response to a growing cross-movement solidarity between Palestinians and Black Americans in their effort to draw attention to Israel's racist practices. Paid Mizrahi "activists" are hired by the Israeli government to derail and delegitimize this movement by emphasizing how the mere existence of Mizrahim in Israel is proof of racial harmony.[29] Mizrahi Jews, they proselytize, moved away from the Arab world and into Israel to escape antisemitism, suggesting that in Israel they live in racial harmony and peace. In reality, however, both Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews across Israel are subject to unequal and discriminatory conditions compared to their white Ashkenazi Jewish counterparts. The function of Mizrahi-washing, then, similar to Israeli pink-washing, uses antisemitism as the primary evil that Jews must escape, all the while promoting a system of white supremacy that unequally benefits the white Ashkenazi Jew at the expense of everyone else.

The charge of antisemitism in its inverted form thus becomes an ahistorical principle, an ontological given, that is disjointed from the context in which it is supposedly occurring.

This is not to say that all Jews support or align with Israel's (settler)colonial project. Historically, the dominant perspective amongst the Jewish diaspora was a rejection of the state form. Overtime, however, Israel (with the help of the West) has come to monopolize the discourse around what it means to be Jewish to such an extent that what was once explicitly an Ashkenazi (European) Jewish experience, supported primarily by a small group of Zionists, has become *the* dominant framing of Jewish life, accepted by the majority of Jews globally. The Zionist erasure and fragmentation of difference across the Jewish diaspora has only worked to further entrench this inverted version of antisemitism, while simultaneously proliferating the narrative that Jewishness and victimhood are one and the same. The post-Holocaust Jewish subject, who is always-already a victim even when they are put in the position of oppressor, is an example of this: the Jew can never be guilty if they are perpetually understood as victims.[30] This ultimately produces a Jewish subject that must balance their newfound power with a contradictory commitment to persecution and suffering.[31]

The harmony with which these contradictory aspects of one's identity come to coexist is representative of Zionism's inculcation into the fabric of Jewish identity writ large, which also implicates the anti-Zionist Jew. Whether Zionist or anti-Zionist, our subjectivity as Jews can no longer be easily disentangled from the Zionist ideology that justifies Israel's existence. Post-Holocaust Jewish identity is thus not outside the imperial core but rather at its center, a reality that Jews (regardless of political affiliation) are implicated by.[32] Consequently, while the experience of antisemitism for Jewish anti-Zionists is used as grounds for solidarity with Palestinians, it is at the same time used to maintain and ultimately promote Zionist occupation: an occupation that adopts Jewish customs, harnesses Jewish stories, and exploits Jewish memories in the name of a

universalized figure of the Jew that can never be freed from the tragedy of Europe.[33]

Antisemitism as Deflection

By oscillating between presence and absence largely at the whims of Zionism—as the above history shows—the threat of antisemitism functions, on the one hand, to allow the oppressor to draw equivalences with that of the oppressed. And on the other hand, this oscillation allows the oppressor to inverse their relationship to power in an attempt to become the victim (at their own whim / when it suits them best) even while they continue to drop bombs on Palestine. The charge of antisemitism becomes both a performance of atonement and an act of legitimation. The West and Israel constantly denounce antisemitism to obfuscate their racism. This produces the backdrop for what Makdisi has termed a "double reality"[34]: while some of us witness a publicly televised genocidal assault on Palestinian life, large swaths of people are in active denial that what is occurring is genocide, or anything in excess of what can be called "self-defense." Upholding the latter position is the increasingly sinister strategic mobilization of the spectre of antisemitism, a spectre designed to solidify the Jew's position as a victim of an unending series of persecutions which conveniently ensure that whatever Jews do to uphold the existence of the Israeli nation-state is *preemptively* cleared of any wrongdoing.

Ghassan Hage draws attention to how this functions ideologically. As Hage notes, the threat of "antisemitism" makes possible what initially presented itself as "an impossibility: how to be racist while also claiming that you have a critical relation to your past which requires of you to never be racist ever again."[35] This emboldens the right to attack the so-called antisemitism of progressive and radical activists and scholars, both Jewish and not, for their activism against the Israeli state and in support of Palestinian liberation. All activities designed to

expose Israel's evils become subsumed within antisemitism's spectre, which must be vociferously defended lest the underpinning lie be revealed: that not only does every European inhabit inside of them a small Hitler, as Aimé Césaire once remarked, but that Israel is an artifact of an antisemitism designed to conceal this truth.[36] The threat/accusation of antisemitism functions as the perfect deflection from any complicity in domination, "delegitimis[ing] all those who wish to recognize causality" and therefore call innocence into question.[37]

A recent example of this took place at the end of December 2023 at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) where identifying genocide as an explicitly *un*-Jewish value went from rhetoric to legal defense.[38] Tal Becker, an advocate on the Israeli team, argued that Israel's intimate relationship with the horrors of genocide exempts them from the possibility of committing a genocide of their own. The phrase "never again," he explained, is one of Israel's "highest moral obligations."[39] By emphasizing this history—which of course produced the very convention used by South Africa to build their case against Israel in the first place—Becker's aim was to divert attention away from the overwhelming proof of Israel's genocidal attack across occupied Palestine by recentering Jewish victimhood. Put differently, a history of antisemitism that reinforces the Jew's position as victim was used to claim not simply moral innocence but *legal* innocence. The ICJ may have ruled against Israel, delivering an almost unanimous decision that the country was committing "plausible genocide," however, Israel's longstanding campaign to exploit Jewish victimhood, and to implant that victimhood at the heart of Jewishness– a campaign that has rendered it essentially impossible to speak about Palestinian resistance or liberation without bringing up antisemitism—exposes one of the central limits of international law in the face of power. Or in the words of Jake Romm and Dylan Saba, the aftermath of the ICJ ruling highlights the "qualitative asymmetry of war between a stateless population—for whom all political violence is a form of war—and an advanced military power, which can literally pick its battles."[40] Antisemitism's ideological

power, in its inverted form, eclipses Palestinian death while simultaneously reifying Israel's raison d'être.

Focalizing Jewish victimhood at the expense of Jewish power, however, does not only form the basis for the large-scale Zionist denial of Israel's genocidal assault across Palestine. The anti-Zionist Jew also draws equivalences between Jewish suffering and Palestinian suffering in a way that reinforces Zionism's impunity. Much of the discourse advanced by Jewish anti-Zionist activists and organizations have relied heavily on the idea that Jewish safety and freedom is wrapped up with Palestinian safety and freedom. Peter Beinart, editor-at-large of *Jewish Currents* (one of the largest and most popular journals on the Jewish left today), for example, professed support for anti-Zionist Jewish organizations like *Jewish Voices for Peace* based on these exact characteristics. In an interview last year, Beinart expressed his support for *JVP* because their "basic idea that Israeli Jewish safety depends on Palestinian safety . . . [is] one of the best ways of fighting antisemitism . . . because it makes it clear that this is not a struggle of tribe versus tribe."[41] Here, not only does Beinart characterize *JVP's* anti-Zionism as premised on a fundamental equivalence between Jewish and Palestinian safety but he also articulates his support for anti-Zionism as dependent upon the necessity of drawing this equivalence.

Joshua Gutterman Tranen's recent take down of Beinart's new book *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning,* articulates the precise problem with this perspective. For Tranen, Beinart relies on a tired (and common strategy within anti-Zionism) to develop a public language for standing against Israel that could simultaneously sidestep the conservative trap of antisemitism. Here Tranen argues that "a neat bifurcation of Judaism and Zionism is neither possible nor politically useful."[42] Beinart and his self-indulgent book (although not explicitly anti-Zionist) are a symptom of a larger problem within anti-Zionist Jewish discourse and activism that exclusively relies on expressions of solidarity rooted in a central falsity: that Palestinians and Jews have had symmetrical and

comparable experiences. In reality, however, there is a staunch power asymmetry between Jews and Palestinians that cannot be clearly articulated without a willingness to implicate not only Zionist but also Jewish complicity in both racial colonial capitalism and Israel's (settler)colonial project. As Judith Butler long ago reminded us, "If we start with the presumption that one group's suffering is *like* another group's, we have not only assembled the groups into provisional monoliths—and so falsified them—but we have launched into a form of analogy building that invariably fails."[43]

And yet, the common anti-Zionist Jewish response avoids attending to Jewish complicity, instead arguing with Zionists over the minutiae of what qualifies as "real" antisemitism and/or "real" genocide. Many anti-Zionist Jewish organizations, for example, have put out statements that redirect the charge of antisemitism back on Zionist administrations and Zionist institutions themselves to debunk charges of antisemitism aimed at Palestinian organizing.[44] Additionally, they have used their own proximity to the *Shoa* to corroborate Palestinian claims that Israel is committing a genocide in Gaza. While these moves are lauded as instrumentally important forms of praxis, they mirror the same talking points Zionists use, albeit in the inverse, to justify Israel's infinite right to exist. Consequently, the recentering of Jewish victimhood and proximity to persecution works in favor of, rather than against, "Zionism's strength as a social and discursive phenomenon."[45]

One site where this culminates is the university, in what Samuel P. Catlin calls "campus panic"—a phenomenon adopted by Western mass media to position the campus as "the most urgent scene of political struggle in the world" threatening Jewish life at unprecedented levels.[46] Here, the so-called rise of antisemitism across North American campuses gets filtered through the specious claim that this could lead to a second Holocaust.[47] This outlandish fearmongering, however, remains relatively untouched by anti-Zionist Jewish organizations, who seem to rely on similar appeals to Jewish suffering. The problem with "campus panic,"

according to mainstream anti-Zionist rhetoric, is that it distracts from the presence of a more "real" form of antisemitism.[48] The presence of a *real* antisemitic boogeyman is thus reinforced rather than diminished in the process, solidifying the seemingly omnipresent spectre of antisemitism. Ultimately this contributes to what Steve Salaita has identified as the "main rationale for Israel's war on civilians: Hamas is a perpetual cipher and simulation . . . a peculiar and unknowable Palestinian savagery" at risk of popping up anywhere where there is expressed support for Palestine.[49]

Subsequently, even the most well-intentioned Jewish anti-Zionist strategies of redirecting the charge of antisemitism back at Zionism and helping substantiate the claim that Israel is committing genocide, solidify the position of the Jew as adjudicator of the veracity of all forms of persecution, including the Palestinian experience. This does two things, both of which reinforce each other. First, it supports the ongoing delegitimization of Palestinian's as truthful narrators of their own experience. Second, it perpetuates an asymmetrical power dynamic where the Jewish experience with persecution is placed over and above the Palestinian experience with persecution. As Catlin observes, the portrayal of antisemitism across university campuses somehow becomes a "greater concern than what is happening in Gaza," where over the past two years, the IOF has murdered over 50,000 Palestinians, buried thousands more beneath the rubble, injured and maimed over 90,000, and displaced over 85% of the population.[50]

The Jewish Implication

This is what the anti-Zionist Jew is up against: refusing and dismantling an ideological regime that not only privileges the emotional standpoint of the oppressor/colonizer over and above the colonized/oppressed but also, as Randa Abdel-Fattah articulates it, "inverses the relational power dynamic such that the oppressor becomes the hapless victim, even as they drop weapons of mass

destruction, destroy all semblance of civic life, and exact the lethal might of the Western military machine on unarmed men, women, and children."[51] At present, however, the Jewish anti-Zionist movement has yet to seriously reckon with the severity of the weaponization of Jewish identity, instead trying to preserve Jewishness at the expense of Zionism. Produced in the process is a solidarity that comes with a caveat: Jewish support for Palestinian liberation extends up until the point where Palestinian interests diverge from Jewish interests.

Well-known anti-Zionist Jew Chanda Prescod-Weinstein reflects this position in a now deleted tweet that reads: "Random PSA that saying 'Jews' when you mean 'Zionists' or 'Zionist Jews' is actually indulging and promoting a Zionist talking point and if you're doing it while criticizing Zionism, you're doing the critique wrong." Prescod-Weinstein deleted their tweet in response to the instant backlash it provoked, most notably from well-known Palestine activist Mohammed El-Kurd who exposed the hypocrisy that lay at its core: From a Palestinian perspective the distinction between Jew and Zionist is irrelevant. This point is not only symbolically important, but it is also materially true. Israel is a Jewish ethnonationalist state made up of a dominant Jewish population that both enacts and supports brutal and repressive tactics against Palestinians in the name of Jewish safety and security.[52] According to PEW research center, 39% of Israeli citizens believe that Israel's military response against Hamas in Gaza has been "about right" and 34% believe it has "not gone far enough." [53] In other words, at least 73% of the population of Israel actively supports the genocide of Palestine, a country that houses over 45% of the global Jewish population.

Despite these numbers, the fact of the matter remains that Israel and its military might, which is made up primarily of Jewish soldiers, acts with impunity in the name of Jewish safety and security, which means that the Jewish anti-Zionist position that Zionism is incompatible with Jewish values simply does not hold up under scrutiny. Appeals to Jewishness (especially Jewish victimhood and innocence), from both the right and the left, have been subsumed by the Zionist

project whether we like it or not. Any Jewish commitment to Palestinian liberation must reflect this reality, which means confronting the way, not only Zionism, but also Jewishness, functions in the service of the (settler)colonial project rather than against it. The wholesale weaponization of Jewish identity and/as suffering provides Israel with its foundational justification, legitimizes the Zionist project, funds over seventy-five years of violent occupation, and gives not only Zionists but all Jews, regardless of their political leaning, birthright to the country.[54] To respond appropriately requires that we radically rethink what it means to be an anti-Zionist Jew on the left today.

Jewish anti-Zionism, at minimum, has a duty to take seriously Palestinian voices, over and above our own, especially when it comes to the future of Palestine. Anything short of this and anti-Zionist Jewish discourse becomes indistinguishable from liberal Zionism. Problematically, a simple cursory glance at the verbiage used by many Jewish anti-Zionist organizations, for example referring to Palestine as Israel-Palestine, or proclaiming a commitment to human rights discourse, international law, and the nation-state, shows how many Jewish anti-Zionist organizations have failed to do even the bare minimum. This feels especially absurd given Palestinians have been critiquing these semantic and political choices as "nothing more than an attempt to legitimize a colonial state" for over a *decade*.[55]

These rhetorical slippages, although not shared by every Jewish anti-Zionist, are symptomatic of the longstanding commitment across anti-Zionist Jewish discourse to extract Zionism from Jewishness and Jewish values, or to de-Jewify Zionism. Some anti-Zionist Jews have even continued to narrate the events of October 7 as a bloody attack by Hamas instead of as an act of anti-colonial resistance.[56] Regardless of what remarks follow this point, to speak about October 7 as an attack is not only to obfuscate from everything that preceded this event: the seventy-five plus years of a genocidal assault on Palestine done primarily by Jews in the name of the Jewish people, but it is also to maintain an

asymmetrical power dynamic that will always put Jews first at the expense of the Palestinian movement. Put simply, until the anti-Zionist Jew is willing to reckon with *Jewish complicity* and take Palestinian voices seriously, appeals to Jewishness will continue to be used in service of Zionism, regardless of whether that was their intention. In the process, the point I began with is reinforced: Jews are presumed ontologically innocent through their self-proclaimed status as victims, while Palestinians are not even given *the presumption* of innocence. With all of this in mind, my intention here is to sharpen the contradictions of the present and contribute to/strengthen an anti-Zionist Jewish politic that supports Palestinian liberation "by any means necessary."[57] To do this, I am writing against any attempt to try to save Israel and by-proxy Jewishness from itself; this cannot be the priority. Rather, as Noura Erakat points out, "the priority should be the ending of this condition of permanent subjugation that Palestinians have been expected to endure."[58]

To conclude, I turn to Henry Schwarzschild's remarks in his letter of resignation from the small journal *Sh'ma* in protest of Israel's war on Lebanon in 1982. Here Schwarzschild openly condemns Jewish political and public institutions, including *Sh'ma,* who believe, whether implicitly or explicitly, that the death of the Jewish people is "inherently more tragic than the death of the Palestinian people."[59] Heeding his call today means being willing to commit wholeheartedly to Palestinian liberation even if it poses a risk to Jewish life (at least as we currently know it). As anti-colonial struggles have shown time and time again, the Manichaean conditions of settler colonialism often require inverting the matrix in which the colonizer's life is worth more than the colonized.[60] Put bluntly, this means accepting Al-Aqsa Flood as an act of anti-colonial resistance, a necessary prison break initiated by and for a caged people, despite its impact on Jewish life. Depicting anti-colonial resistance as anything otherwise is to put colonialism and the settler before the colonized and imprisoned.[61] Our anti-Zionism cannot come with a caveat. It is not just a ceasefire that anchors our politics, not just an end to the occupation, or an end to the state of Israel, but also an end to the

prioritization of Jewish safety and security over Palestinian life. This is not an antisemitic point to make, but even if it were, the settler colonial dispossession and genocide of Palestinians—of which the last two years are only the latest round—demands that we make it.

Notes

1. Em Cohen (@EmCohen_), "What's the rhetorical purpose." ↩
2. Rajagopal, "No need." ↩
3. Unlike Rajagopal who uses the term "Judaism" in the essay cited here, I have intentionally chosen to use the term "Jewishness." My concern throughout this piece is primarily about the identity marker of "Jewishness" and less a focus on religious practice. In other words, while "Jewishness" here may encompass "Judaism," it is not wholly determined by it and is thus meant to cover more than just religious practice. ↩
4. Rajagopal, "No need." ↩
5. Rajagopal, "No need." ↩
6. Naomi Klein, "We Need an Exodus from Zionism," *Guardian*, April 24, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/24/zionism-seder-protest-new-york-gaza-israel < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/24/zionism-seder-protest-new-york-gaza-israel> . ↩
7. See Gabriel Winant's excellent piece responding to a piece by Joshua Leifer in *Dissent Magazine* in October 2023 shortly after Al-Aqsa Flood for more on how Israel turns grief into colonial power: https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/a-response-to-joshua-leifer/. ↩
8. It should go without saying that this piece is not meant to erase the actions and forms of resistance anti-Zionist Jewish activists have participated in over the years, many of whom have put their bodies on the line in a way that has impacted their material realities (getting arrested, fired, tear gassed, etc.). My analysis is not meant to delegitimize any of these actions but rather is a contribution to them, an attempt to sharpen the contradictions of the present. ↩
9. Ussama Makdisi, "The West's Love for Israel Erases the Middle East's Real History," *Jacobin*, November 29, 2023, https://jacobin.com/2023/11/western-philozionism-palestine-israel-history-colonization-antisemitism-philosemitism-racism < https://jacobin.com/2023/11/western-philozionism-palestine-israel-history-colonization-antisemitism-philosemitism-racism> . ↩

10. During this time there were various competing responses to the persecution of Jews in Europe, Zionism was simply one of many. ↩

11. At the time, there were only 14,000 Jews and 426,000 Arabs in Palestine. For more information on Israel's settler colonial project throughout history see: https://visualizingpalestine.org/visual/shrinking-palestine/ < https://visualizingpalestine.org/visual/shrinking-palestine/> . ↩

12. Makdisi, "West's Love." Theodor Herzl's Zionist manifesto appeared in Europe for the first time in 1896, a time that was dominated by Jewish socialism. Due to Jewish socialism's dominance, Herzl had to turn elsewhere for support of his Zionist project, so he turned to the very people responsible for the Jewish pogroms. It was here that Herzl found alignment: both were interested in getting Jews to leave Europe. Theodor Herzl, "Texts Concerning Zionism: 'The Jewish State,'" 1896, *Jewish Virtual Library,* https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-the-jewish-state-quot-theodor-herzl < https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-the-jewish-state-quot-theodor-herzl> . ↩

13. It also should be noted here that at the time Zionism was only one of numerous alternatives on how to respond to Jewish integration in Europe. As Shaul Magid writes, there were three central responses: "One was assimilation, in which Jews would fully become a part of the society, and in doing so would have to shed some or all of their Jewish identity. Another was a form of Jewish internationalism . . . or Jewish communism more generally, that Jews would become part of the larger global movement for equality and labor rights. Zionism was another alternative, which basically functioned under the assumption that emancipation wouldn't work in terms of creating a viable alternative for Jews to remain attached to the Jewish identity in this emancipated world." Daniel Denvir and Shaul Magid, "Zionism's History Is Also a History of Jewish Anti-Zionism, An Interview with Shaul Magid," *Jacobin*, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/01/shaul-magid-interview-zionism-anti-zionism-judaism-history < https://jacobin.com/2024/01/shaul-magid-interview-zionism-anti-zionism-judaism-history> . ↩

14. For more on this, see Mary Turfah, "Peace From Our Point of View," *Protean Magazine*, 2024, https://proteanmag.com/2024/09/19/peace-from-our-point-of-view/ < https://proteanmag.com/2024/09/19/peace-from-our-point-of-view/> ; or Ussama Makdisi, "What Happened to the Ideal of Multireligious Arab Modernity?" *Aeon*, 2021, https://aeon.co/essays/what-happened-to-the-ideal-of-multireligious-arab-modernity < https://aeon.co/essays/what-happened-to-the-ideal-of-multireligious-arab-modernity> . ↩

15. Turfah, "Peace." ↩

16. A Jewish person of central or eastern European descent. ↩

17. It is important to note that in the nineteenth and twentieth century the Jewish diaspora was much more clearly divided. Different experiences, political commitments, and cultural and religious practices defined Jews depending on where they lived. It was not until the proliferation of Zionism, which is premised on the fundamental denial of the Jewish diaspora in the name of a Jewish nation state, that Jews became increasingly

assimilated into a singular identity. For more on this, see Giorgio Agamben, "The End of Judaism," *Ill Will*, September 30, 2024, https://illwill.com/the-end-of-judaism < https://illwill.com/the-end-of-judaism> .

18. I use the phrase "(settler)colonial project" to describe the current configuration of Israel and "colonial racial capitalism" to describe the global system. Israel's (settler)colonial project is part and parcel of the broader global colonial racial capitalist system, to which Israel contributes and benefits from.

19. Makdisi, "West's Love."

20. This dynamic also played out in the form of German reparations to Israel and an almost immediate forming of allyship between the two countries.

21. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40, 3, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630 < https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630> .

22. Herzl, "Texts Concerning Zionism."

23. Em Cohen, "Jewish Fear in a Zionist Unreality," Medium, June 22, 2021, https://emcohen.medium.com/jewish-fear-in-a-zionist-unreality-16ff43d8543d < https://emcohen.medium.com/jewish-fear-in-a-zionist-unreality-16ff43d8543d> .

24. Today this is mobilized by Israel most clearly in Netanyahu's mass migration campaigns which are designed to encourage Jews "to come home" to Israel in the face of a so-called rising tide of antisemitism in the Western world. In this way, the spectre of antisemitism is used by Israel to create the "requisite impetus" for Jews to settle on Palestinian land. This is also mobilized through Birth Right and the March of the Living, both of which are trips designed to encourage young Jews to move to Israel. See https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/5/birthright-in-a-time-of-genocide; < https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/5/birthright-in-a-time-of-genocide;> https://jewishcurrents.org/the-rise-of-october-7th-tourism < https://jewishcurrents.org/the-rise-of-october-7th-tourism> ; https://jewishcurrents.org/reimagine-and-reclaim-the-concept-of-birthright < https://jewishcurrents.org/reimagine-and-reclaim-the-concept-of-birthright> .

25. For more on this, listen to the conversation between Fred Moten and Josh Briond on the podcast *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, November 11, 2023, https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/a-dam-against-the-motion-of-history-fred-moten-on-palestine-the-nation-state-of-israel < https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/a-dam-against-the-motion-of-history-fred-moten-on-palestine-the-nation-state-of-israel> .

26. Esther Romeyn, "(Anti) 'New Antisemitism' as a Transnational Field of Racial Governance," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 1–2 (2020): 199–214, 199, https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1696048 < https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1696048> .

27. Romeyn, "(Anti) 'New Antisemitism,'" 214. ↩

28. Alana Lentin, *Why Race Still Matters* (Polity Press, 2020), 137. ↩

29. Lihi Yona, "Mizrahi-Washing: The New Face of Israeli Propaganda," *+972 Magazine*, 2020, https://www.972mag.com/mizrahi-washing-hasbara-israel-propaganda < https://www.972mag.com/mizrahi-washing-hasbara-israel-propaganda/> . ↩

30. Frédéric Lordon, "End of Innocence," *NLR/Sidecar*, April 12, 2024, https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/end-of-innocence < https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/end-of-innocence> . ↩

31. Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love,* trans. Rachel Valinsky (MIT Press, 2016). ↩

32. In the last ten years, for instance, the US NGO sector has allocated over twenty billion dollars to help facilitate Jewish settlement in Palestine. As a result, the vast majority of the Jewish Israeli population have at least two passports. See Leila Shomali and Lara Kilani's conversation on the podcast *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/decolonization-is-not-a-discourse-it-is-a-material-process-leila-shomali-and-lara-kilani-on-anti-zionism-as-decolonization < https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/decolonization-is-not-a-discourse-it-is-a-material-process-leila-shomali-and-lara-kilani-on-anti-zionism-as-decolonization> , as well as Leila Shomali and Lara Kilani, "Anti-Zionism as Decolonisation," *Ebb Magazine,* December 14, 2023, https://www.ebb-magazine.com/essays/anti-zionism-as-decolonisation < https://www.ebb-magazine.com/essays/anti-zionism-as-decolonisation> . ↩

33. Examples of anti-Zionist Jewish discourse adopting the same logic as liberal Zionism in their discussions around anti-semitism can be found in some of the major anti-Zionist organization's statements against antisemitism, for example, those of *Jewish Voices for Peace* (https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/11/09/antisemitism-dangerous < https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/11/09/antisemitism-dangerous/>) or *Independent Jewish Voices* (https://www.ijvcanada.org/ijv-statement-on-antisemitism < https://www.ijvcanada.org/ijv-statement-on-antisemitism/>). ↩

34. Makdisi, "West's Love." ↩

35. Ghassan Hage (@anthroprofhage), "Marx argued that sometimes ideology works as the ideational resolution of a contradiction that cannot be resolved in practice. The category of 'antisemite' today has such an ideological function in Germany. It makes possible what presents itself initially as an impossibility," Twitter, February 25, 2024, https://twitter.com/anthroprofhage/status/1761724529838313884 < https://twitter.com/anthroprofhage/status/1761724529838313884> . ↩

36. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 37). ↩

37. Lordon, "End of Innocence." ↩

38. Shola Lawal, "ICJ Genocide Case: What Are Israel's Arguments and Do They Hold Up?," *Al Jazeera*, January 12, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/12/icj-genocide-case-what-are-israels-main-arguments < https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/12/icj-genocide-case-what-are-israels-main-arguments> ↩

39. Lawal, "ICJ Genocide Case." It is worth noting here that the anti-Zionist Jew similarly mobilizes the rhetoric "never again" to preface their solidarity with Palestine. ↩

40. Jake Romm and Dylan Saba, "Acts Harmful to the Enemy," *N+1*, 2024, https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/acts-harmful-to-the-enemy/ < https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/acts-harmful-to-the-enemy/> . ↩

41. Charles M. Covit, "A Conversation With Peter Beinart," *The Harvard Crimson*, February 2, 2024, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2024/2/2/covit-beinart-oct-seven/ < https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2024/2/2/covit-beinart-oct-seven/> . ↩

42. Joshua Gutterman Tranen, "There is Only Shame," *Protean Magazine*, January 31, 2025, https://proteanmag.com/2025/01/31/beinart-there-is-only-shame/ < https://proteanmag.com/2025/01/31/beinart-there-is-only-shame/> . ↩

43. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 128. While Butler's critique of analogy is useful here, I diverge from Butler's arguments in *Parting Ways* because they lean towards the realm of supporting an impossible pacification that parrots much of the same arguments as that of the liberal Zionist. ↩

44. See statements by, for example, *Jewish Voices for Peace* (https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/11/09/antisemitism-dangerous < https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/11/09/antisemitism-dangerous/>) or *Independent Jewish Voices* (https://www.ijvcanada.org/ijv-statement-on-antisemitism < https://www.ijvcanada.org/ijv-statement-on-antisemitism/>). ↩

45. Steve Salaita, "Some Lessons about Zionism and Anti-Zionism from an Ongoing Genocide," *No Flags, No Slogans*, 2024, https://stevesalaita.com/some-lessons-about-zionism-and-anti-zionism-from-an-ongoing-genocide/ < https://stevesalaita.com/some-lessons-about-zionism-and-anti-zionism-from-an-ongoing-genocide/> . ↩

46. Samuel P. Catlin, "The Campus Does Not Exist," *Parapraxis*. April 21, 2024, https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-campus-does-not-exist < https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-campus-does-not-exist> . ↩

47. Many mainstream media outlets have reported on the so-called rise of antisemitism across college campuses as the warning signs of another Holocaust brewing. See Jack Stripling, "Colleges Braced for Antisemitism and Violence. It's Happening," *The Washington Post,* October 31, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/10/31/antisemitism-college-campuses-jewish-hamas-gaza <

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49. Steve Salaita, "Hamas is a Figment of Your Imagination," *No Flags, No Slogans*, 2023, https://stevesalaita.com/hamas-is-a-figment-of-your-imagination < https://stevesalaita.com/hamas-is-a-figment-of-your-imagination/> . ↩

50. Caitlin, "The Campus Does Not Exist." ↩

51. Randa Abdel-Fattah, "On Zionist Feelings," *Mondoweiss*, December 27, 2023, https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/on-zionist-feelings < https://mondoweiss.net/2023/12/on-zionist-feelings/> . ↩

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53. Becka A. Alper, "How U.S. Jews are Experiencing the Israel-Hamas War," *Pew Research*, April 2, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-jews-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war < https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/02/how-us-jews-are-experiencing-the-israel-hamas-war/> . ↩

54. Mohammed El-Kurd, "Jewish Settlers Stole My House. It's Not My Fault They're Jewish," *Mondoweiss*, 2023, https://mondoweiss.net/2023/09/jewish-settlers-stole-my-house-its-not-my-fault-theyre-jewish < https://mondoweiss.net/2023/09/jewish-settlers-stole-my-house-its-not-my-fault-theyre-jewish/> . ↩

55. Shomali & Kilani, "Anti-Zionism as Decolonisation." ↩

56. For clear examples of leading anti-Zionist scholars articulating October 7th in this way, see Judith Butler, "The Compass of Mourning," *London Review of Books*, 2023, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/judith-butler/the-compass-of-mourning < https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n20/judith-butler/the-compass-of-mourning> ; or Naomi Klein, "How Israel Has Made Trauma a Weapon of War," *Guardian*, October 5, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/oct/05/israel-gaza-october-7-memorials < https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/oct/05/israel-gaza-october-7-memorials> . ↩

57. Kaleem Hawa, "The Nakba Demands Justice," *Jewish Currents*, May 14, 2021, https://jewishcurrents.org/the-nakba-demands-justice < https://jewishcurrents.org/the-nakba-demands-justice> . ↩

58. Scholars Against Genocide, *The Dig Podcast*, April 19, 2024, https://thedigradio.com/podcast/scholars-against-genocide < https://thedigradio.com/podcast/scholars-against-genocide/> . ↩

59. Henry Schwarzschild, "Letter of Resignation from the Editorial Advisory Board of *Sh'ma*," *Sh'ma*, 1982, retrieved from Twitter, https://twitter.com/ArielleLAngel/status/1784575798361681970/photo/1 < https://twitter.com/ArielleLAngel/status/1784575798361681970/photo/1> . In Harry Schwarzschild's letter of resignation, he speaks candidly not only of the moral bankruptcy of the Israeli state but also of the Jewish people who he explains have claimed "the right to impose a holocaust on others in order to preserve {a Jewish} State." And while he retains his membership within the Jewish community, he speaks warily of the way Israel has triumphed over the Jewish people and their history to such an extent that he "deems it possible that the State . . . will prove essential to the survival of the Jewish people and that it may likely take the Jewish people with it to eventual extinction." Nonetheless, Schwarzschild commits to the necessity of Israel's eventual extinction. The letter is worth reading in its entirety. ↩

60. There are two common misreadings of anti-colonial struggle. One is a deliberate misreading of anti-colonialism as a call for genocide. And the other, an advocation of anti-colonialism as compatible with an equal rights and equal freedoms doctrine. Neither of these, however, represent actual anti-colonial praxis, and are in fact far more similar to each other than they first appear. Jewish anti-Zionism must be willing to reject the trap of the latter if it aims to genuinely support Palestinian anti-colonial struggles for liberation. For more on this, check out Leila Shomali and Lara Kilani's conversation on the podcast *Millennials are Killing Capitalism* (https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/decolonization-is-not-a-discourse-it-is-a-material-process-leila-shomali-and-lara-kilani-on-anti-zionism-as-decolonization < https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/decolonization-is-not-a-discourse-it-is-a-material-process-leila-shomali-and-lara-kilani-on-anti-zionism-as-decolonization>) as well as their piece "Anti-Zionism as Decolonisation" in *Ebb Magazine*. ↩️

61. Kaleem Hawa offers an important critique of this indirect appeal to the settler in their piece "The Nakba Demands Justice." Here Hawa explains how Palestinian decolonization means ending the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people by giving "it all back." This will not be easy. It will undoubtedly require Palestinian resistance "by any means necessary" because, as Hawa importantly shows, anything short of this keeps peace in the hands of the colonizers. You can access this piece here: https://jewishcurrents.org/the-nakba-demands-justice. ↩️

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Marronage and its Aporias

by Alejandro Beas-Murillo | Aporias, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT In much proto-nationalist discourse and academic and historical work, marronage has come to represent an open receptacle of competing narratives and desires in the history of slavery, revolt, and Blackness. Paying attention to the ways marronage is portrayed across the different nations and territories of the Caribbean reveals grand narratives of heroism, the formerly enslaved outsmarting and outlasting planters and colonial officers in the hills and mountains of the West Indies and the swamplands of the US South. Through these narratives, this article argues, the maroons are mythologized both as figures of resistance against the racial terror of slavery and as the founding fathers of the post-Abolition, post-Independence Caribbean nation-state. These heroic yet limited depictions of marronage, though important in showing the ways the maroons were able to unsettle the plantocracy, fail to reckon with the impossibility of redress in the afterlives of slavery and the limits of sovereignty in the wake of the non-event of Emancipation. Marronage offers neither a clean break from slavery nor an easy path beyond, yet the proto-nationalist accounts of its praxis that I explore here insist on turning the incapacity of the enslaved into the capacity—to resist, to survive—of the heroic maroon. Through its calculated erasure of slavery, the marronage produced in these narratives generates its own set of aporias, pointing us in the direction of freedom but reminding us, at the same time, of its impossibility. What is at stake in this article is not an exploration of the future of marronage but the exploration of its past and its supposed break from slavery, as well as an interrogation of the ideals of Black resistance and Caribbean sovereignty and freedom that the heroic maroon is tasked with representing.

KEYWORDS Blackness, Caribbean, nationalism, resistance, slavery, sovereignty

Introduction

During the second half of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of the nominal independence of most of the colonized nations of the Caribbean, creative writers,

historians, and scholars expressed longing for a figure who could bring unity and cohesion to the region and people that had been rendered history-less. For many, this figure was the maroon. In her study of the depictions of the maroons in West Indian literature throughout the twentieth century, Cynthia James argues that the archetypal, hypermasculine, and heroic maroon acted as "the putative bearer of the Jungian collective unconscious,"[1] allowing the Caribbean to understand its nominal sovereignty and freedom through the lens of the maroon's anti-slavery, anti-colonial resistance. In what she defines as the maroon narrative genre, James says that maroons are portrayed as venerated heroes, warriors, and ancestral figures, the formerly enslaved outsmarting and outlasting the enemy, creating and protecting their own communities in the outskirts of the plantation and the colony. James considers that the maroon narrative is concerned with "writing against the background of a record of estrangement," countering natal alienation and the imposed lack of origins and history with a desire to build a home and a history "out of traces of previous cultural knowledge."[2] As a character, the maroon is affected by a hunger for the past but is in constant motion towards the future. It is precisely this negotiation between lost origins and a commitment to survival that originally solidified the maroon's cultural metamorphosis in the New World and thus made him the perfect embodiment for the newly independent nation-states of the Caribbean.[3]

Making a similar argument, Charles Carnegie suggests that the maroons are viewed as a distinctive root of the national tree, nourishing a now nominally independent Caribbean into the future.[4] Carnegie argues that the nostalgic portrayal of the maroon as a tragic hero—which is particularly predominant among the male Caribbean creative writers of the twentieth century such as Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire—has been coopted by the nation-state and repurposed as proto-nationalists and freedom fighters. Their leaders—like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny of the Maroons, and Julien Fédon—"have become subjects for state rehabilitation, often as actual monuments set apart in sacralized state gardens."[5] As a result of his museumization as literal monument, literary

character, and analytical lens, the maroon is turned into the absent presence of Caribbean history. This absent presence has rendered the maroon vulnerable to creative writers and academics, who contribute to the process wherein marronage is turned into an open receptacle of competing desires, investments, interests, and narratives about resistance,[6] fugitivity,[7] sovereignty,[8] and Black masculinity.[9]

Structuring this absent presence are the very mountains, forests, and mangroves of the Caribbean that have long served as generative sites of narration for creative writers and academics alike. In particular, the geographies of marronage facilitate the maroon's ability to avoid capture. Paradoxically, however, his hiddenness renders him vulnerable to academic and literary capture. Due to this (necessary) invisibility, the maroon generates a series of myths and interpretive opportunities. Projected meaning is layered upon him by scholars, creative writers, and historians who find in this absent presence a potential to bridge the gap between the trauma of slavery and the unfulfilled promises of emancipation and independence.[10] Characterized by its fugitivity, by the literal and metaphorical absence of the maroons—that is, the maroon needs to always be absent to avoid capture and is charged with narrative capacity because of their very absence[11]—the maroon is positioned as freed (yet obfuscated), and so also positioned in distinction to the enslaved.

As Carnegie indicates, the maroons index racial purity because they become the signifier for "a noble, original, uncontaminated, defiant, New World blackness" that can somehow exist outside of the history of slavery.[12] Elsewhere, Rachel Mordecai describes a "prelapsarian Blackness" in her analysis of the cultural production of and about the 1970s in Jamaica. Mordecai suggests that the desires and anxieties caused by the political situation of the recently-independent Jamaican nation-state generated a break between a modern, creole multiracial Blackness and the aforementioned prelapsarian Blackness: "From this perspective, the enslavement of Africans and their descendants is the original sin

of Caribbean history (a notion which problematically elides the near-genocide of aboriginal Caribbean people), yet it is possible—indeed, necessary [for these writers]—to imagine an originary black Caribbean identity before, beyond, or somehow untouched by slavery's taint."[13] Hence, the repurposing of marronage as freedom creates not only an absolute break between slavery and marronage but also the creation of a form of Blackness that is unable to escape slavery's determination and a different Blackness somehow untouched by slavery's horrors. Carnegie and Mordecai thus put into relief that the hypermasculine, heroic, yet invisible maroon is always produced against and with the hypervisible figure of the suffering slave. Through this opposition, a break between enslavement and marronage-as-freedom is established, such that, to paraphrase Taija McDougall, these portrayals of marronage feed on the enslaved's corpse "but neglect the wake" to demonstrate that Blackness, having been given access to the realm of being through the performance of grand marronage, is characterized by its fugitivity "only to reject the captivity and suffering that is bound to the Black body."[14]

It is this last quality of marronage as mobilized by scholars, politicians, and creative writers from the Caribbean that I wish to interrogate more in my treatment of the maroon as a category of critique. That is, that in order for the maroon to generate a history of Blackness that can serve as a counternarrative to the West's white supremacist project, marronage is portrayed not only as the endless escape from slavery towards freedom but as a complete, permanent ontological separation from the condition of enslavement. To put it differently, I contend that the positioning of the mythical, hypermasculine maroon as the sublimation of Black resistance in the Caribbean depends on the absolute break between the slave and the maroon, which erases the flight from enslavement to conditional freedom that marronage was originally meant to signal. I also argue that the maroon is constructed as necessarily male and hypermasculine, thus ensuring the portrayal of Black women in the Caribbean at large as mothers, lovers, or healers without agency, subjectivity, and power.

On Heroes and Mothers

In the male-dominated Afro-Caribbean literary order of the twentieth century, the maroon occupies a privileged space as he—for the maroon is traditionally imagined as a man—is able to generate genealogies of resistance, a cohesive and coherent origin story for the Caribbean nation-state, and the construction of a Caribbean Blackness untainted by the dishonor, alienation, and violence of slavery. In his critique of the masculinist thrust contained within Aimé Césaire's Negritude and the literary project of the *créolité* movement, A. James Arnold suggests that the emancipatory potential of the suffering male hero—also known as the Rebel—of Césaire's Negritude lies in his ability to transcend the representations of feminine weakness that the colonial imagination had imposed on the Caribbean[15] Assigned narrative and emancipatory potential, the character of the Black male hero—even if the way he is presented and embodied shifts across genres and authors—becomes central to the poetico-political projects that comprises the twentieth-century Caribbean literary order. The heroic Black male protagonist, as opposed to the feminized, emasculated enslaved, is able to produce a counternarrative to the Western imperial symbolic order and lead his people to the completion of the project of emancipation.

Drawing from Sylvia Wynter, Arnold claims that the Black male hero is tasked with occupying the space of the super-male, someone even more masculine than Western Man.[16] This Black super-male is supposed to stand in opposition to what Arnold calls "the erotics of colonialism," a model based on "aggressive heterosexual desire" that determines, and thus limits, the systems of representation available to Black male writers in the Caribbean.[17] However, the Black super-male produces his own erotics, replacing the feminized version of Black masculinity manufactured by the colonial imagination with a super-male that, paradoxically, cannot break out of the same emasculating colonial logic: faced with the endless threat of emasculation and feminization, the super-male

needs to constantly reassert his own masculinity, furthering the marginalization of women and calcifying the feminized status of the enslaved.

This apparent inability or unwillingness to conceive Caribbean freedom and sovereignty outside the confines of the heteropatriarchal order and the Western erotics of colonialism is also evident in Édouard Glissant's own theorization of marronage's narrative potential. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant had lamented the fact that Martinique and the Caribbean at large had failed to turn the maroon into their tutelary hero. This missed opportunity had robbed the Caribbean of a true heroic figure of the past who would have been tasked with the creation of the region's history.[18] Arnold reads Glissant's nostalgia for the hero-that-could-have-been as evidence of Glissant's own inability to find a way out of the emasculating colonial logic: "The heroic Maroon, as the archetypal figure of a masculinist West Indian literary imagination is, therefore, a logical necessity."[19] What can be inferred from Arnold's assessment is that Glissant's longing for the figure of the maroon is not necessarily a consequence of Glissant's search for a heroic male figure but for a narrative figure, yet in what is clearly a central aporia of the academic and literary capture of the fungible maroon, we see how narrative capacity—which I understand as the ability to not only generate stories but to also produce history—is exclusively a capacity of the heroic Black man. This move has two consequences, which I aim to explore throughout the rest of this essay; on the one hand, it portrays the figure of the heroic Black man more generally, and the maroon more specifically, as someone filled with capacity (to narrate, to resist, to generate meaning) and on the other hand equates this capacity with manhood and masculinity and with freedom and sovereignty.

The reliance on hypermasculine archetypes led to the removal of all female subjectivity and intimacy from what the literary canon of a newly independent Caribbean. This rendered women writers from the region and the Diaspora voiceless and always already assumed to be silent in the literature produced in their own region. Even as scholars like Carolyn Cooper have tried to recover the

figure of the female maroon from its historical obscurity, this recovery has only managed to reify the masculinist thrust behind the maroon narrative and the construction of Black Caribbean women as always already determined by their role as caretaker. In her exploration of the figure of the maroon in Jamaican literature and historiography, Cooper defines the female maroon as "roots woman . . . the forerunner of all the nurturing mother figures of Jamaican balm-yard folklore."[20] These are women tasked with mothering their communities by sharing their knowledge of herbal medicine and the arts of "the arcane, obeah and myal."[21] Although Cooper's observations are meant to offer a reparative and expansive reading of maroon culture, wherein she argues that women played a significant role as keepers of knowledge and demonstrated that the meaning of marronage could be extended in order to encompass forms of resistance beyond the fight and flight matrix, it is clear that attempts to fight back against misrepresentation are seemingly unable to move beyond the gendered construction of marronage.

It is true that one could turn to historical and ethnographic studies of maroon communities to argue that the gendered conception of marronage stems from the fact that some maroon communities were, in fact, organized according to heteropatriarchal hierarchies.[22] However, I contend that this gendered division, which is indeed critical to the academic and literary consumption of marronage as both narrative terrain and analytical lens, occurs because the capacity to resist, to be, to narrate is exclusively assigned to the male maroon. The visibility of the woman maroon and of Caribbean women more generally is then antithetical to the maroon narrative genre despite the acknowledgement of their presence. This is not to say, of course, that the acknowledgement of a presence—or a present absence—does not hold potential. In fact, feminist scholars and writers producing work from and about the Caribbean have rightfully pointed out the gendered aspect of these asymmetrical histories of resistance, where the acts of revolt and sabotage conducted by enslaved and maroon women, often in their roles as midwives, lovers, and mothers, are anonymized by archival violence.

Consider, for instance, Haitian fiction writer Évelyne Trouillot, who said that her decision to write the novel *The Infamous Rosalie* was motivated by a desire to correct the heavily gendered and exclusionary official history of the Haitian Revolution—which left out the contributions of enslaved and self-emancipated women—without resorting to the romanticization of female maroons and revolutionary heroes.[23] We could also analyze Maryse Condé's groundbreaking, provocative novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, which critiques the Black male hero from Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* and rejects the very figure of the hero in West Indian literature. As Condé told Françoise Pfaff in an interview, there are no heroes in this world, only "people who tried to do things, though sometimes they did not succeed. Most of the time they were a mixture of strength and weakness. I don't know any heroes."[24] Condé's rejection of the hero in her work does not necessarily provide a way out of the aporias generated by the academic and literary treatment of the maroons, but I do suggest we understand it as part of a larger tradition of Afro-Caribbean women writers and intellectuals who have called for the complete re-evaluation of the forms and modes of expression available to Black women. Whenever the romance of marronage and fugitivity are invoked, then, we would be wise to remember the violence that these concepts and practices are also able to inflict. In their desire to break away from the centrality of the heroic maroon, Afro-Caribbean women writers have demonstrated that marronage exists in the viscosity of the ruse of emancipation and the heteropatriarchal imagination of the Western project. In trying to counterbalance the erotics of colonialism mentioned by Arnold, the academic and literary construction of the maroon required the marginalization of Black women from the history of maroon resistance.

The Ruse of Capacity for the Maroon and the Enslaved

While A. James Arnold's analysis of the erotics of colonialism eventually led him to posit an antithetical relationship between the heroic maroon and the marginalized Caribbean woman, Arnold's model is also generative in thinking about the desire to separate marronage from the history of slavery along the lines of capacity. Capacity, in this case, does not only signal the assumed difference in capacity between the enslaved and the maroons, but also its gendered construction in the maroon narrative genre, as well as the scholarship around maroons. As I hope has become clear, the traits of the maroon based on his depictions in certain strands of maroon historiography, academic discourse, and creative work produced by Caribbean men emphasize the character's masculinity. Let us briefly see what this break between marronage and slavery looks like and the role that capacity plays in the theorization of this split.

In her discussion of the historiography and archival practices of the maroons in Jamaica, Jenny Sharpe argues that the heavy presence of the maroons on the island made it difficult for British colonial officers and enslavers to establish a clear distinction between so-called rebellious and "loyal" slaves. For the British, Sharpe says, the maroons embodied the incipient rebelliousness of all enslaved people, who were always "at risk" of going maroon.[25] Jamaican maroon identity, however, is "rooted in the knowledge that, unlike other Jamaicans, they fought for their freedom and thus never were slaves."[26] Consider, also, such accounts of maroon life like Carey Robinson's chapter in E. Kofi Agorsah's *Maroon Heritage*, which seemingly require the creation of the previously mentioned distinctions among the enslaved Africans taken to the Caribbean based on their character and spirit. Although Robinson acknowledges the immense trauma that the enslaved experienced in their forced transplantation from Africa to the Americas, he assigns value—that of who could eventually become a maroon—to the ability of an

enslaved person to "rid themselves of the condition that had been imposed on them" and never accept their enslaved status.[27] Those who fled the plantation, Robinson argues, "had to have a special quality of heart, mind and will."[28] In using character and will as markers of difference between the enslaved and the maroons, Robinson hints at a distinction between both categories along the lines of ontology and capacity. In other words, the enslaved's captivity and the maroon's conditional freedom become ontologized because the capacity to attain freedom has already been predetermined by the "special quality of heart, mind, and will" of the maroon and the incapacity of the enslaved.[29] Whereas the maroons never accepted their enslaved status, they who remain enslaved seem, by this same flawed logic, to supposedly offer a degree of resignation or acceptance of said status.

Robinson's arguments help illustrate Carnegie's and Mordecai's aforementioned critiques: by making character and spirit as foundational to the idea of marronage as freedom and sovereignty are, Robinson is selecting specific elements of a Blackness supposedly untainted by the horrors of slavery to craft his own imagined narrative of marronage. It is difficult to understand exactly how Robinson establishes his dichotomy even if we assume that emphasizing the courage of the maroons is a central component of this type of narrative. It is even harder to discern when the break between slavery and marronage starts for Robinson, which poses a series of important questions: Can someone be born with a natural inclination towards freedom while someone else, due to a lack of spirit, character, or will, might be more inclined towards resignation, thus predetermining who might run towards freedom and who will stay in the plantation? If the desire for freedom is something someone needs to be born with, wouldn't that start a process by which the same antiblack imperial logic that naturalized the equation of Blackness with "slaveness" is reinscribed on the flesh of specific Black people? Finally, when does one become free and how is freedom defined—not just in Robinson's formulation but in the academic and literary renditions of the maroons more generally? These questions become all the more

complicated if we consider the oscillation between figuring marronage as freedom and marronage as movement towards freedom that permeates so much of the writing and theorizing on the maroons.

These questions point to the many inconsistencies and aporias that characterize our modern understanding of marronage and the figure of the maroon, but what is most significant about arguments like Robinson's is the violence they require in their insistence on finding a form of Blackness that can be extricated from the history of slavery. The use of capacity as a lens through which to theorize the split between slavery and marronage illuminates the violence performed on both the enslaved and the maroons, in their treatment as literary and academic objects of study, as well as the many limitations to such an approach. If, as Sara-Maria Sorentino indicates by way of Aristotle, the enslaved represents pure incapacity "only insofar as their only capacity is to be a tool for others,"[30] then the transition from enslavement to the condition of marronage is as much about the act of fleeing the plantation as it is about the demonstration of the capacity—a special quality of heart, mind, and will as Robinson puts it—to do so. What is at stake here at the same time is that the maroon, through literary and academic capture, is also made a tool for others. If we follow Sorentino's lead and establish that the incapacity of the enslaved resides in their fungibility, we see how the academic and literary treatment of marronage contradicts exactly what it seeks to accomplish: the fungibility of the enslaved is shared by the maroon, who is unable to access capacity on his own terms and is instead charged with the capacity to be a (creative and academic) tool for others. Sorentino continues, saying that "the slave's only capacity is to be a slave, to mark the difference between nothing and virtue; once no longer a slave, they are something else (usually a worker, sometimes a human) and it is through this something else that their capacities can be exercised."[31] If I had earlier suggested that the maroon needs to remain in the *in medias res* of fight and flight for his transformation into the hero of the Caribbean to work, we can now see that the *in medias res* is the space of

Sorentino's "something else": an empty space waiting to be filled with capacity, meaning, somethingness over beingness.

The maroon's construction as the super-male, the Rebel, the tutelary hero of the Caribbean, and the antithesis of the enslaved ultimately fails to rescue the maroon, the Black masculinity, and ancestral Blackness he is tasked with rescuing from the horrors of slavery. Whereas it sought to offer closure to the unfinished project of Caribbean emancipation and independence as well as to correct the violence and feminization imposed by the imperial imagination, what the academic and literary depiction of the figure of the maroon ultimately accomplishes is to illuminate, yet again, the ongoingness of the afterlives of slavery and the ruse of Caribbean sovereignty in an age of ever-rising fascism, Western interventionism, and Caribbean nations that continue struggling for self-determination. Similarly, it highlights what generations of Caribbean feminist writers and scholars have denounced for decades: that the heteropatriarchal order that thought itself at the helm of the post-independence Caribbean sustained itself through the marginalization of Caribbean women from the historical record, the region's genealogies of resistance, and the intellectual and creative life of their societies.

Ultimately, the meanings, metaphors, and investments that the catachrestic figure of the maroon accumulates in its transformation into the embodiment of Black resistance might allow us to understand yet another aspect of the fungibility of Blackness and the masculinist thrust at the center of the nation-state itself. The aporias that this essay has highlighted seem difficult to solve under our current terms of engagement not only with marronage but with the history of slavery more broadly. Scholars at the intersections of Caribbean studies, Black studies, gender studies, political theory, and the environmental humanities, continue to push the boundaries of what marronage can do and what questions it might satisfy. However, perhaps more time should be devoted to (re-)evaluating what our continued desire to extend the meaning and purpose of marronage tells us

about our own scholarly inclinations. More importantly, as Walcott reminds us, understanding the forms of violence that marronage itself produces *is* the task that will ultimately allow us to notice the multiple forms of unfreedom in the face of the ruses of emancipation and independence for the Caribbean and the Black Diaspora.[32]

Notes

1. Cynthia James, *The Maroon Narrative: Caribbean Literature in English Across Boundaries, Ethnicities, and Centuries* (Heinemann, 2002), 8. ↩
2. James, *The Maroon Narrative*, 14. ↩
3. Sylvia Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World* (n.d.), 4. ↩
4. Charles V. Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 137. ↩
5. Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured*, 141. ↩
6. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015). ↩
7. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Duke University Press, 2003); fahima ife, *Maroon Choreography* (Duke University Press, 2021). ↩
8. Pedro Lebrón Ortiz, "Teorizando una filosofía del cimarronaje," *Tábula Rasa*, no. 35 (July–September 2020): 133–56, https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n35.06 < https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n35.06> . ↩
9. In the literary realm, Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (trans. 2021) is the clearest example of the formulation of a liberating Black masculinity, from the constant juxtaposition between "man's unfathomable sperm" and the "woman's trembling belly" (34) to the description of Negritude's poetic project as a virile prayer that is "neither tower nor cathedral / it takes root in the red flesh of the soil / it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky / it breaks through opaque prostration with is upright patience" (35). ↩
10. Consider, for instance, the trajectory that Neil Roberts follows in the previously mentioned *Freedom as Marronage*, where he offers the Haitian Revolution as an example of revolutionary marronage and then extends the meaning of marronage to explain the political, economic, and military projects of Toussaint and Dessalines respectively. Whereas the former is a case of sovereign marronage—the liberation of the enslaved means overthrowing the colonial political order—Dessalines embodies a form of sociogenic marronage, which Roberts describes as not only a change of

political order but the complete transformation of the social order. For a critique of the limitations of Roberts's approach towards marronage-as-political sovereignty, see Gary Wilder's insightful review, "The Promise of Freedom and the Predicament of Marronage: On Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*" *sx* (2017), https://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/promise-freedom-and-predicament-marronage-neil-robertss-freedom-marronage < https://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/promise-freedom-and-predicament-marronage-neil-robertss-freedom-marronage> .

11. Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism," 9.
12. Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured*, 137.
13. Rachel L. Mordecai, *Citizenship under Pressure: The 1970s in Jamaican Literature and Culture* (The University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 151.
14. Taija McDougall, "Left Out: Notes on Absence, Nothingness, and the Black Prisoner Theorist," *Anthurium* 15, no. 8 (September 2019): 1–10, 7, https://doi.org/10.33596/anth.391 < https://doi.org/10.33596/anth.391> .
15. A. James Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture," *New West Indian Guide* 68, no. 1/2 (1994): 5–22, 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41849576 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/41849576> .
16. Arnold's decision to borrow from Wynter is not a coincidence, considering that she has also expressed concerns with the over-reliance on hypermasculine figures that she identified in Black Cultural Nationalism in the Caribbean and North America. Derrick White summarizes Wynter's observations as follows: "The weakness of cultural nationalism is that it inversed the symbolic order . . . but it inverted the norm—creating an Afro-Man as Norm—rather than deconstructing the cultural code" ("Black Metamorphosis" 144).
17. Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism," 6.
18. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (The University of Virginia Press, 1991), 87.
19. Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism," 9.
20. Carolyn Cooper, "'Resistance Science:' Afrocentric Ideology in Vic Reid's Nanny Town." in *Maroon Heritage*, ed. E. Kofi Agorsah (University Press of the West Indies, 1994), 113.
21. Cooper, "'Resistance Science,'" 113.
22. See, for instance, Bev Carey, *The Maroon Story* (Agouti Press, 1997). In a brief section on marriage and "puberty customs" in maroon communities, Carey unintentionally highlights the way women's bodies and sexualities were regulated in the Jamaican maroon communities she studies: "Promiscuity was absolutely frowned on, the Maroons carrying in their memory no record of what is now known as a loose woman." *The Maroon Story*, 181.

23. Laurence Clerfeuille, “Marronage au féminin dans *Rosalie L’Infâme* d’Evelyne Trouillot,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 33–44, 38, https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2012.638843 < https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2012.638843> .

24. Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 45.

25. Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.

26. Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, 5.

27. Carey Robinson, “Maroons and Rebels (A Dilemma)” in *Maroon Heritage*, ed. E. Kofi Agorsah (University Press of the West Indies, 1994), 90.

28. Robinson, “Maroons and Rebels (A Dilemma),” 91.

29. In *The Long Emancipation*, Rinaldo Walcott produces a similar critique when he says that “marronage is a temporal self-emancipation that must collude with its other–captivity.” Walcott, *The Long Emancipation* (Duke University Press, 2021), 107.

30. Sara-Maria Sorentino, “Abolish the Oikos: Notes on Incapacity from Antiquity to Marxist Feminism, Black Feminism, and Afro-pessimism,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 32, no. 1 (2023): 199–243, 206, https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-10427992 < https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-10427992> .

31. Sorentino, “Abolish,” 209.

32. Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Duke University Press, 2021), 108.

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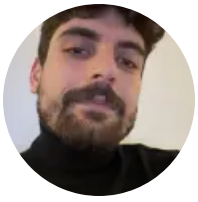

Alejandro Beas-Murillo

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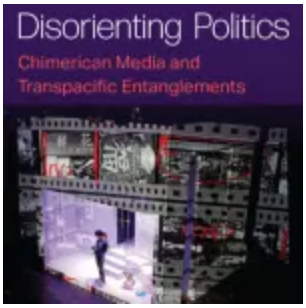
Chimerica: Disorienting Politics

by Fan Yang, Kathalene Razzano, Delores B. Phillips, Mark Tseng-Putterman and Marcus Breen | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025), Positions

ABSTRACT Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Globalization and Culture Working Group Co-Host Kathalene Razzano discuss *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* (University of Michigan Press, 2024) with author Fan Yang, along with writer and historian Mark Tseng-Putterman. This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Marcus Breen.

KEYWORDS COVID-19, China, United States, anti-Asian hate, media, social media

Positions, Season 2, Episode 1



Positions
Chimerica: Disorienting Politics

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Navigating Tangled Chinese-American Relations in and beyond the Mediasphere

By Marcus Breen

Within contemporary media culture we have been "bound together in forms of commonality," as Katy Razzano notes early in the podcast response to Fan Yang's *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements*.[1] By 2025, it now appears that the powers that be in the United States would like us to

be as far apart and disentangled as possible. Stepping away from the complexity of US–Chinese interactions describes the end of the neoliberal "entanglements" that brought the US and China into alignment in the first place. Curiously, what brought us together was an ecstatic scenario of US-sponsored economic fundamentalism that was then, as Yang notes, explored in popular media texts, mostly television, then corporate finance, and finally the ocean that we share. Now, fewer entanglements appear on screens, as the era of Chinese–American interactions gives way to a continuing geopolitical crisis informed by bombastic nationalist concerns, originating in the US.

Such crises, as Stuart Hall argued, define a politics of representation that is foregrounded by cultural studies as the site of contestation in which scholarship and activism combine. Yang's book, which tracks her first twenty years of living in the US as an immigrant, intentionally blurs this site of contestation rather than bringing it into focus, identifying an era when media texts represented interactions that were less conflictual than now. During this time, the cultural struggle became foundational to an appreciation of two ideological systems: hyper-extractive capitalism in its US liberal democratic digital manifestation, against and in relation to socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Not too far from the surface, as Mark Tseng-Putterman points out, is the historical continuation of the Cold War. This history frames what he helpfully refers to as an "ideological binary," one that Americans in their ignorance struggle to get over, where liberalism and authoritarianism remain the constraining anchors of the relationship, even as media texts offer a different, more generous set of possibilities to operate outside of simplistic binaries. Such an optimistic reading gives way, as Yang says, to the "othering" of China in official media, establishing contradictions that have yet to play out.

Operating somewhat in reverse from the texts that Yang discusses, the conjuncture of the present reveals the intensification of US–China relations as a

crisis. For example, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's April 27, 2023 statement, "Renewing American Economic Leadership," marked off where the market fundamentalism of neoliberal globalization gave way to nationalistic "modern industrial and innovation strategy."[2] The plan is not for China to flourish but to "… build the world that we want:" a plan in which "China has to be willing to play its part."[3] As this new US approach takes shape, the political economy of the interactions of the US with China no longer offers evidence of the somewhat cooperative entanglements described in *Disorienting Politics*.

The reasons for the recent disarticulations are clear, as can be further explained through an appreciation of the banning of Chinese electronic equipment during the first Trump administration, to the continuing dispute over and ban of the social media platform TikTok,[4] all, so it is claimed, for national security reasons. Other reasons include the fact that US social media platforms such as Meta want and expect uninterrupted monopoly control of the digital media space.

The circulation of media texts that provide sites for interpretations of transcultural meaning collide with the US government and Jake Sullivan's macro policy statement about the US hegemon's claim to global dominance, and are reinforced by Columbia University Professor Jeffrey Sachs, who said in an interview with China CGTN on December 8, 2024: "China has been too successful from America's point of view."[5]

"Rising China," as the object of these entanglements, is well described by Yang, yet it presents for cultural studies a problematic China–US dilemma because it extends, then falls far short of, a debate about the struggle over culture that is the beating heart of cultural studies. In other words, the politics of representation will not go quietly into the night: one, because national ideological representations should be amplified within a commitment to the critical evolution of cultural studies; and two, neither US or Chinese interests want their culture to be reduced to some kind of global subservience to its opposite.

Yang examines Chimerican media co-production through liberal cultural theories that incorporate political economy in what she considers a new frame, in which representation is redefined by relationality and mutuality. The resulting politics is expressed in an interdisciplinary methodology and as such is welcomed, given its breadth. Yet it hedges its claims. There is little radicality informed by Marxism, with added uncertainty about how to address China's rise. Still, we can see that the answer to exploring entanglements, especially during the COVID-19 years, emerged from the cultural studies methodology, with questions that this podcast raises: "why this, why now," becoming, "why this particular form (of anti-Asian hate)?" Media texts go a long way to answering these questions about representation for cultural studies.

Indeed, by the end of 2024, the contest between representations of the US and China can be characterized less by relational media interactions between the US and Chinese populations and more by the bullying demands of America First white exceptionalists demanding supremacy for their culture. In 2025, in the second Trump presidency, the cultural shifts include a variety of sharp and blunt tools to conduct uneducated surgery on the apparent ideological unity of global capitalism, in an attempt to bring more of the world economy to self-interested, painfully rich American elites and their enablers.

As Yang illustrates in *Disorienting Politics*, soft power in media representations offered US media producers seductive popular media power with which to attract, deceive, and win over to the cause of American liberal democracy the Chinese masses. The hard-edged method of soft power is a matter of critical interpretation, in which the entanglements between the US and China are all-consuming, in the sense that the anti-communist ideological landscape of media production is camouflaged by an entertainment obsession endlessly tweaked by the Military–Industrial–Academic–Media complex. (In my occasional conversations with Chinese young people, it is unnerving to observe their totalized fascination with US media and culture). This adoption is observed in the

casual way in which China is referred to as “authoritarian,” while offering little insight into what this word means for the operation of the intentional demonization of Chinese nationals or their style of socialism.

Consciousness of soft power also offers a way of comprehending media texts within cross-cultural interactions: both the US and China are engaged in making texts that represent their “best” selves. The Chinese admit that their propaganda is a source of publicly beneficial education and information, while the US claims its propaganda is discourse within a perverted liberal democratic universalism that should apply to the entire world. The podcast offers welcome insights into the discursive character of the debate about entanglements, suggesting that what might have been applicable in one media moment’s context—say *House of Cards* depictions of China and the Chinese—has given way to new theories that emerge out of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, even international relations, due to shifts in US Government policy, from soft to hard power.

Unfortunately, soft power is giving way to hard, with the frightening prospect of war, initiated by geopolitical war mongering strategists in the US, who have established hundreds of military bases surrounding China, provocations in the South China Sea, the formation of AUKUS and The Quad . . . the list goes on.

In exploring “politics deeply tied to place,” as Yang says, the value of engaging with China cannot be underestimated. This throws up contradictions that offer valuable ways of engaging with the limits of the US and the Western imagination, while comprehending the curiosity of China’s development within its lengthy national evolution over 5,000 years. This means accepting that the postcolonial present will require fresh eyes and theories with which to interpret China and its relations with the US and the rest of the world. As Yang correctly suggests, “China is not able to speak for itself,” meaning that more mental effort needs to be made to comprehend its development project against a backdrop of sinophobia in the New Cold War era.

More imaginary energy is also needed to explore the way the Chinese state offers public goods that leave the US looking as if its policies are expressions of support for public destitution, as more people are thrown into poverty, debt, and drug dependence while being massaged to new heights of desire within the political fantasy of the redeemer image of Trump.

Remapping the relationship between China and the US is, as Fan suggests, a necessary project that must continue with urgency because it will build knowledge of China as the superpower, even when it is the "absent present." As a welcome development, academic engagement with China is a challenge for cultural studies. If it is to flourish as a critical program, it can inform theories of everyday life by exploring such objects as the availability of cheap "Made in China" consumerist products, as well as areas of concern in geopolitics that define the popular imaginary of "China" in the US mind. Such a focus will be political in the best sense of the meaning, of the struggle over meaning that is central to cultural studies. Such an orientation may involve a disorientating shift in focus away from US-centricity to reflect on the way that culture and now even the air that we breathe, is co-constituted by China—whether we like it or not! "Shared futures" indeed.

The imaginary of China's success can be unsettling for hegemonic interests, whose minds are persistently directed to othering prejudices by all manner of everyday media. Cultural studies can take these explorations of co-constituted media texts along with financial entanglements and shared oceans and air flows, as a welcome stimulant to moving beyond the crisis of potential conflict, to a world of peace and prosperity for all—a win–win.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Delores Phillips:** Welcome to *Positions*, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal, *Lateral*. *Positions* aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and the general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. In our first episode of Season 2, we're joined by the Globalization and Culture Working Group to discuss Fan Yang's newest book titled, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements*, published by University of Michigan Press. Fan is joined by two special guests, Kathalene Razzano and Mark Tseng-Putterman. Enjoy the discussion.

[00:00:44] **Kathalene Razzano:** I'm Kathalene Razzano. I am chair of the Globalization and Culture Working Group for the Cultural Studies Association. I am a visiting lecturer at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in the Media and Communication Studies Department.

[00:01:01] **Mark Tseng-Putterman:** I'm Mark Tseng-Putterman. I'm a postdoctoral fellow in the Asian American Studies program at University of Pennsylvania. I'm glad to be here.

[00:01:10] **Fan Yang:** Hello, I'm Fan Yang, Professor in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County as well.

[00:01:21] **Delores:** And I'm Delores Phillips. I'm your host and the Vice President of the Cultural Studies Association; I run the African, African American, and Diaspora Studies Center at James Madison University; and I'm also Associate Professor of English.

[00:01:38] **Kathalene:** I really appreciate the way in which you are able to mobilize this idea of Chimerica and Chimerican media to reveal the way in which that China and America part of that works to mystify other ways of thinking, of living, of being, of forming solidarity with other groups around the planet, whether it be around questions of labor, whether it be around questions of environmental justice, whether it be around questions of who has the right to debt, or what is it to experience to be in debt?

[00:02:39] **Kathalene:** And so I think that the way in which you work through these examples of Chimerican media to get us to this final place where we're thinking these transnational entanglements are ones that bind us together in forms of commonality that media often work to eclipse or erase. And what you show us is that we can start to explore these in ways through conceptual frames of disorienting and this relational politics.

[00:03:23] **Fan:** Thank you so much, Katie, for that question, and I just want to quickly mention that I always credit Katie for bringing me into cultural studies from way back, and it's such a great honor to have her here to raise these insightful questions. And give me an opportunity to talk about what gave rise to the project.

[00:03:44] **Fan:** And I should just quickly mention too, that I did not coin the term "Chimerica." The term actually came from Niall Ferguson, who is an economic or financial historian. When he was using the term, he was primarily thinking of the so-called economic symbiosis between the so-called superpowers—that is, the United States and the People's Republic of China.

[00:04:09] **Fan:** But I happen to have seen this play in London back in 2012. And that play also took the name from Niall Ferguson called "Chinamerica." And at the same time, it was appropriating it to really get at some of these entanglements of China and America, especially in the twenty-first century. In some ways, I was inspired by that particular play and started to think about it at this particular moment.

[00:04:39] **Fan:** And I've also decided to use "Chimerica" as a shorthand to refer to very deep, complex entanglements, be they economic, cultural, political, and ecological. And so as I use "Chimerica" to describe these entanglements, in many ways, those entanglements can be seen—or they are made visible—through these media artifacts that I call "Chimerican media."

[00:05:09] **Kathalene:** Fan, in your previous book, which was called *Faked in China*, you actually look at the move from "made in China" to "create in China" and like the Chinese state project for that was, I was thinking of it dialectically, and you say that actually in that mix, what we find is a whole new sort of area, which was "faked in China," and I feel like you're doing a similar dialectical discussion in your new book, *Disorienting Politics*.

[00:05:48] **Fan:** One connection I do want to think about is the chapter where I talk about *Firefly*. And I again, want to thank Katie for alerting me to it because I remember back in the day when I share my observation with her that, Oh, when I watch things like *Bones* or *House*, these like main characters who are brilliant, they also oftentimes happen to speak Chinese or understand Chinese. Something's going on. And then that's when Katie said, "Oh, you should watch *Firefly*." And at that time, I didn't even know it was already a cult series. And it was quickly canceled, of course, even though it later on became a film too.

[00:06:30] **Fan:** So I engaged with that artifact in that chapter of cultural Chimerica in terms of this imagination of Chinese language as the global *lingua franca* of the future, both on the sides of American cultural producers like Joss Whedon, who uses Chinese speaking or Chinese slang in the show *Firefly* as a way for the main characters who are underdogs to form these alliances among themselves and create this intimate connections within them and really also projecting the different vision of community that was also lacking in neoliberal America, whereas, on the other hand, you also have Chinese state entities trying to imagine building a strong linguistic nation, building things like the Confucius

Institutes globally. But then that, of course, became controversial in the US due to many of the sinophobic sentiments.

[00:07:32] **Fan:** So try to bring them together again to think about what competing visions of culture emerged in these different discourses. And I think I do actually feel there's something very intriguing about *Firefly*. And I should say that when I first saw it, I also didn't quite understand. I, even as a native Chinese speaker, I'm like, what? But then realizing how genre bending it was as a show and how there are very deep layers of hegemonic, counter-hegemonic struggles, as they are associated with Chinese speaking or not. So I feel like moments like those are actually really worthy, even though they could be short-lived or very much taken up as a subcultural form. But they are still very much worth looking at, as these moments have in themselves some kind of political possibilities.

[00:08:37] **Mark:** So there are a couple valances that I want to parse that I think are particularly useful and stood out to me. The first is, coming from a Cold War historical perspective, I think what's so useful and interesting to me about this book is that it shows the ways in which Cold War American discourses about China have evolved, but also remain very durable in certain ways into the twenty-first century. I think that your book does such a great job of tracing how this ideological binary between liberalism and authoritarianism as represented by the United States and China respectively remains such an anchor for the ways that Americans think about and talk about China. And of course, that is very much an inheritance of this Cold War discourse of communism, the form of fascism or totalitarianism. And I think what your book does is it shows how in such a very different moment in which, as you're tracing the role of kind of transnational circuits of media between the US and China that are so very different from that Cold War period, that kind of these ideological paradigms remain so hardened. Even as the circulation of these media objects, in theory, increases the opportunities for connection or intimacy or understanding between American and Chinese people, I think, as you emphasize, this absent presence of China remains.

And that connects to the second point that really stands out to me, which is, I think what's really useful about your framework of Rising China is that it provides a way to think about how to theorize US–China relations through analytical inheritances of postcolonial studies of cultural studies and operationalizes an understanding of US imperialism on the one hand, and specifically these inequities between the US and China that I think continue to dictate both the material relationship between the two countries. But as you're emphasizing, this discursive context in which Chimerica is a conjoined manifestation of the US and China, but not on equal terms.

[00:11:02] **Fan:** I recall when I was finishing the book amidst the pandemic in 2020, and I realized: this is a marker of twenty years of living in the US as someone who came to the US from China in 2000. So my life is exactly split between the two. And it's very interesting to observe China or what I call this figure of Rising China from the vantage point of America, especially as we inhabit this or what I would call American media life. I think that the understanding of relational politics stems from this kind of epistemological betweenness, both geographically, but also as someone trained in cultural studies, I also have this interdisciplinary in betweenness. I'm not really bound by any approaches necessarily, but I'm also really interested in the production, circulation, and consumption of media artifacts and processes. That's where I see the possibility of approaching these objects and mining them in some ways to see what we can gather in terms of a different understanding of our beings in the world. And for me, as an interdisciplinary cultural studies scholar and someone who has been working on media and globalization, I really want to think about them together through thinking more critically of the connection between media and politics. So the way that I get at my argument is that even though, if you dig into how these media artifacts came about and how they enact these entanglements, you really get a sense of how interconnected we are as humans. But at the same time, there are ideological demarcations that mask these relations. In such a way that it really delimits our imagination of politics that extend beyond the place of the nation.

The way that I try to push forward this understanding of relational approach to politics is to argue for a greater understanding of these interconnectivities between media, people, places. That way, perhaps we can try to envision a different kind of politics that is simultaneously tied to the place, but also deeply engaged in the spaces that are created by the media.

[00:13:41] **Delores:** I was deeply intrigued by what you said on page 127–128, where you wrote, "My core argument has been that while China can make visible the numerous entanglements of the two superpowers, the ideological framing of the Chinese state as a racialized other has eclipsed the possibility to engage these entanglements as a basis for imagining politics anew." Can you speak to that very briefly?

[00:14:05] **Fan:** I think it does demand a deeper investigation. The way that I discuss in the book, for example, is to try to think about this figure, what we may call Rising China, that's a very distinctive twentieth-century phenomenon. And in some ways, it is a non-human entity, if you think about the state as not necessarily in human terms, as the category of race has historically been applied or racialization has historically applied. But at the same time, if you think about the type of figuration or configuration of that agent and actor. The COVID moment comes to mind, if you think about a rhetoric of "China virus," for example, there is this figuration of the Chinese state as an actor. So that kind of formation of the Chinese state as a subject in cultural studies, we like to use this notion of formation of the subject, and it creates the condition for it to be then objectified and dehumanized. And if you think about the often description of China as anti-human-rights or superhuman when it comes to some Olympics training, perhaps, that also corresponds to this kind of China as the nonhuman, China as the superhuman or subhuman. And then a third reason perhaps is also, as we know, in a COVID moment, there was a spike in anti-Asian racist attacks in the US, and many might argue that, well, there is a longstanding presence of "Yellow Peril," yellow perilism that is describing anti-Asian racism that is very particular about

Asian bodies, whereas phobia historically has been the term to describe a fear of China, the Chinese government. And to me, at this moment, when we have the very material presence, but also a very imaginative one, Rising China, perhaps it's really important to think about why this, why now, as the longstanding cultural studies question, a research question. Why this particular form of anti-Asian racism? Is there something quite connected to the figure of Rising China? And that is to me, an opportunity to theorize that lends a lot of analytical precision to this figure of rising China and how to manifest itself in Chimerican media. And so that's the goal here.

[00:16:51] **Mark:** I think your use of Rising China as a way to get at this contradiction between the way that China is represented as the superpower, as both dehumanized and superhuman in certain ways, and yet still operating in kind of an unequal discursive terrain in which on the context of American media or more broadly, Anglophone and Western media, China is an agent and yet also is not able to speak for itself in I think equal terms. And so this contradiction of Rising China is both indexing discourse of China as superpower, but also representing this discursive inequity, I think, is a really important way of bringing some of these frameworks of empire from postcolonial studies, from Asian studies and global Asias towards really like a contemporary analysis of US–China relations.

[00:17:50] **Fan:** Thank you so much. I want to quickly follow up. There are two things that your great comments—really appreciate that—reminded me of. The first thing was the influence of postcolonial thought on my thinking in relation to China. And I feel that, as we know, postcolonial critique does not necessarily or often have China in the framework, with the exception of scholars like Dan Vukovich, perhaps. So in some ways it's quite important to think about how postcolonial presence manifests itself on the plane of the imaginary. And that was the case of how I talked about intellectual property rights regime as this branding imaginary that has shaped the Chinese state and the Chinese cultural producers

and consumers. Whereas in this case, I really actually appreciated Mark's framing of the discursive inequity. And in the Chinese context, there's also a term (huàyǔ quán), like discursive power or discursive right. There's *House of Cards*, which is one of the chapters, that is a Netflix production that became supremely popular in China, but I have yet to see something of that kind of equivalent that comes from China and became as popular as how popular *House of Cards* was in China. So of course we could think of the more recent production of the *Three Body Problem* as something pointing to a perhaps different future, given the fact that this was one of the first globally popular Chinese sci-fi works by a Chinese author who won the Hugo Award—Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem*, a trilogy translated by Ken Liu, wonderfully, into English. The fact that Netflix picked it up and produced its own version, but, interestingly, remapped in ways that depart from a lot of the original narratives. So yeah, I would like to imagine perhaps there are things shifting, and in terms of this discursive inequity, but to me at the moment of my writing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I think it's also important to point to the very material dimension, as Mark pointed out, of China's presence. If you think about American media life, if we understand media as contents, while they are still conveyed through all these material objects that are to this day, despite the de-linking and the trade war, the majority of these gadgets are still reproduced in China bearing the label "Made in China"—sometimes "Designed in California" if it's Apple, but that label itself is a very important symbolic presence of the Chimerican entanglement that is very important to recognize if you try to think about China's presence. And try to think about what that figure might do ideologically in shaping the media landscape. We are, or I am anyway, glued to TikTok these days, just looking at how Gen Z is responding to the election shift. And I just also found it—I'm late to the game—but the fact is that TikTok is a Chinese-owned platform, where it seems to me a lot of the very exciting political interactions are taking place. And of course, not too long ago, we had this attempt to ban the platform. There is this claim that I make about media, not just as instruments for representation of politics, but as an

environment in which politics takes place. And I found it interesting that so often we are hearing the term like, the energy of the youth or the constituents that is unprecedented or hasn't been seen in years, and I was very intrigued by that. Perhaps there was some more room to develop this understanding of media as an environment for politics, like generating this energy in a way that fuels the machinery of the electorate.

[00:22:47] **Kathalene:** Are we seeing like TikTok, maybe an example of that with the rise of social media? Can politics exist without media?

[00:23:00] **Delores:** So Mark, I'm especially intrigued by the activist context in your own work that has to do with Black Lives Matter and TikTok, as we mentioned earlier. And how that activist impulse seems to travel through both of your work. So could you both comment a bit on that?

[00:23:16] **Mark:** I think from an activist or political perspective, there's so much to untangle about some of the connections that you're making about breath and its invocation in the context of Chinese environmental activism, as well as Black Lives Matter activism. For me, something that stands out is thinking about TikTok as this activist space, a transnational activist space. And from Black Lives Matter activism to more recent activism around Palestine, I think in the US there's been a very interesting discourse about TikTok that links the sinophobia and racialization of the Chinese state to just general kind of anti-progressive or anti-activist politics here in the United States. So there was a lot of talk about TikTok being this communist conspiracy to undermine young American support for Israel because of the proliferation of pro-Palestinian content on TikTok, which I think really collapses some of the intersections of what we're talking about here.

[00:24:19] **Fan:** If you go back to earlier canonical works on nation and nationalism, like Benedict Anderson, there's so much to be said about the connection between nation, imagination of the nation, and media—in his case, print media, and in our case, a multiplicity of media platforms and remediating one

another. And so this may be a point to, again, connect back to understanding media, not just as discourses and contents, but also material objects—all these possibilities for people to record George Floyd that generated the largest street protests in history. And yeah, if we bring in the understanding of the workers who also struggle in COVID moment, in iPhone factories in China, that opens up this kind of possibility of this relational political reimagination. And perhaps another dimension is the generation of e-waste of media as a very deep and troubling kind of trajectory of this explosion of personal gadgets and the constant upgrades that we somehow take for granted, the kinds of ideological work that goes into securing planned obsolescence. So, those are ways in which the framing of media as environment and the environment as media can be very productive in thinking about politics.

[00:26:19] **Delores:** And stepping very briefly outside of the American context, I'm thinking about how China is the largest supplier of personal devices across Africa, which itself has intimate ties with global circuits of e-waste.

[00:26:36] **Fan:** A really quick connection . . . I had been working on Shenzhen special economic zone in Southern China that has a company called Transsion, that supplies Africa with this top selling brand called [Tecno Mobile]. One of the interesting things on the one hand, as you say, Dolores, is that it can be understood as capital accumulation of Chinese capitalists, but on the other hand, there's an intriguing aspect to the fact that one of the reasons that these phones were so popular had to do with the fact that they take better pictures of darker-skinned individuals, just implicitly challenging the normative whiteness that shapes the algorithms, designs of globally popular brands such as iPhones. I think that's another example of the need to continue to investigate what's happening in the Afro Asian encounter. I think that the recent emergence of the framework of global Asia is a remapping, perhaps thinking about some of the physiological possibilities of connecting Asian American studies with the previous area studies understanding of Asia and try to map out some new terrain of thinking about

China or Asia as kind of these ageographical figures. So this is where Chimerica comes in as a very interesting metaphor, because in the play that I mentioned, there was one line that says it is, it's not a place on a map, but certainly a lot of us do seem to be inhabiting a place that we call Chimerica. I feel like by connecting China to the longstanding critique of racial capitalism is also a very important move in some ways, thinking about how the colonial past is remapped onto the postcolonial present, thinking about people of color globally participate in a global digital economy, from the global mining of Congo to content moderators in the Philippines and the kinds of "i-slaves" that I mentioned that produce all the "made in China" gadgets. Thinking about these moments where people of color are participating in the production of global digital economy is also, I feel like, still understudied in a way and needs to be made more visible in the study of media and globalization.

[00:29:30] **Mark:** I think what makes this so interesting is that from my vantage point, I think one could argue that China also is an absent presence within the field of Asian American studies, which I think is interesting precisely because as you were gesturing to the origins of the field in the 1960s, were very much in the context of student activism and engagements with Third Worldism and internationalism and China as a kind of revolutionary image or imaginary served a really crucial, I think, ideological and analytical role in the Asian American movement of the 1960s, as well as the birth of the field in the context of that movement. And yet, as you've been speaking to, I think it's been difficult in the twenty-first century for Asian American studies frameworks to make themselves flexible and adapt to this discourse precisely of Rising China because of the field's own counter-hegemonic political impulses—the question of how we engage with China as a contemporary state and also as a contemporary rhetorical device in American racial politics and discourse. I think that your book fits into this broader trend of kind of the transnational turn of Asian American studies, particularly vis-à-vis China in really important ways.

[00:30:56] **Fan:** Yeah, thank you so much for, again, bringing up another point that I felt is worth highlighting too. You mentioned this kind of counter-hegemonic impulse of Asian American studies and the fact that there is the undeniable economic rise of China—and one may also argue a neoliberal turn of China—despite that we can call the Beijing consensus, as opposed to the Washington consensus. At the same time, those legacies of Afro Asian alliance from the Sixties are not necessarily gone. If you also think about the rhetoric around the One Belt, One Road very controversial multiplicity of projects, sometimes connected to the state but other times not necessarily and even at times retroactively grouped under One Belt, One Road. But at the same time, there are all these contestations between the neoliberal presence of America, and China's arguably different kinds of developmental presence in places like Africa. So this is actually another project that I'm beginning to look into. And maybe that's another reminder too, that perhaps there's more to be done in connecting China to the workings of racial capitalism. In light of these more recent Afro China connections and the connection to the global Sixties around anti-white struggles both within the US and globally, I think that's very important to still think about it. Just as you mentioned Cold War lineage simultaneously evolving but at the same time holding this kind of durability, perhaps another way to think about it is these kind of counter-hegemonic anti-imperialist struggles from the Sixties, in what ways do they also have a continual presence in the twenty-first century? That's a very worthy question to look into as well.

[00:33:31] **Kathalene:** Fan, I think this actually might be a good turn to think about your concept of fiscal Orientalism and thinking about the work that does.

[00:33:44] **Fan:** It was interesting to think about this Rising China figure in relation to the longstanding framework of Orientalism. I made the case that even though they're still very much used in thinking about *Orientalism* by Edward Said, talking about representation. But here you do have both in reality and imaginarily a figure that is more powerful than the American self and, at the same time, the action of

this figure is not to be dismissed, even though in this chapter, I talk about this in terms of a fiscal Orientalism, acknowledging that the framework of Said still is quite useful. But later on, I move on to talk about perhaps China here is not a preformed object to be represented in these media. Instead, I theorize it as a figure co-constituted with Chinese Chimerican media. That is a different way to approach this figure that does not reduce it to something that's already static and there to be represented. This is my attempt to move beyond the representational framework and try to think about this co-constitution of agents in media production and the media artifacts that make them visible.

[00:35:23] **Fan:** The fact that when you depict China in those terms, it also delimits the ways in which American politics can imagine the role of the state, particularly limiting the possibility for the state to be a figure that is meant to secure the public good. If you hear right-wing politicians routinely talk about government spending and not wanting to become like China, that kind of rhetoric is performing the ideological work to argue that the state should be limited in becoming an agent of public good. That's an important connection. That is something we should continue to observe.

[00:36:23] **Kathalene:** I'm also wondering if we can talk about the very first term on the cover of your book, this disorienting. So I'm thinking "disorienting" as being disoriented, right? Dizzy, unsteady, but also dis-*orienting*.

[00:36:43] **Fan:** As you've rightly pointed out, there is a pun. Several layers, I would say . . . or one is, as you pointed out, there is a dizzying effect perhaps with this figural formation of Rising China in a sense that I'm not sure exactly how to operate as Mark also earlier pointed out, perhaps the impact on Asian American studies.

[00:37:13] **Fan:** That is another example to think about. How do we grapple with this rising figure? And I also found it really illuminating to go back to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, where she talks about the operation of racism, how that is

tied to this kind of orientation of the body. So if you think about that layer, the Fanonian encounter with someone who recognized him as a Black man. It also had this segment where they talked about this encounter people from other places, when they encounter racism, say, during COVID and high Asian racism, it's oftentimes predicated on this feeling of disorientation, feeling that they're out of place; they're not supposed to be here. I think there's a very highly precise way to think of this disorienting effect of racism on people of color who are perceived to be from elsewhere and should go back to that elsewhere. At the same time, Ahmed also had this other layer—which I really appreciate and connecting that to the play that I analyze—is that when we think about place-based politics and the space that is created by trans-Pacific media, perhaps that also opens up the possibility of a environment for politics that is not necessarily tied to the ground of the nation, but just like the ocean, the Pacific provides a fluid environment for regrounding, so to speak, of our imagination of politics, tying back to this notion of relationality. Perhaps these moments, for example in my conclusion, when I talk about the "I can't breathe" slogan in the Black Lives Matter movement and the kinds of deadly air pollution that you observe in China due to its status as the world's factory. These very disparate experiences of not being able to breathe by people of color can be brought into a productive relational understanding to create this new ground—so called "ground"—for rethinking politics. I feel like there is the dialectical understanding of disorientation at work in addition to rethinking the connection between China and Orientalism as well. Thank you for that.

[00:40:19] **Delores:** So the displacement of the Orient as a space that is simply represented, as you said very early in your book, you're trying to peel away from this concentration on simple representation to move toward relationality, mutuality, and yet tension. I think that you said that the title works on these different layers are very much complimentary, as well as thinking about this affect, dizzying kind of effect, of disorientation. Might we now discuss the concluding chapter and the ultimate conclusion that you draw, especially with breath and ecological entanglement.

[00:41:00] **Fan:** This is the chapter that I'm most curious to hear folks' reaction to because it was written in the pandemic, just when we were returning to aspired normality. This notion of breathing that was so denaturalized—breathing together, I should say—in that moment, as we were just regaining that capacity to breathe together had this impact on me, trying to think about, is there something to be done about air, something that perhaps is another kind of medium. If we can relate to how scientists talk about the air pollution that can travel from China back to the US West coast, is that air Chinese air? Or is it because of the kinds of mass production of products in China for American companies that generated that air pollution that makes that air Chimerican air? I found it interesting to think about this category of air and then jump from there to think about the role of the state in tackling the climate crisis that we are arguably encountering in a more intensified manner, and some people have called a pandemic as a dress rehearsal for the oncoming climate crisis. Many in the environmental studies world would involve the two biggest polluters on the planet, namely China and America, how the states of these two nations can be very important in addressing that kind of crisis. I think, for me, in addition to thinking about the trans-Pacific air as Chimerican media as a way to talk about the ecological entanglement of the two superpowers, it also brings the notion of relational politics back down to form the configuration of the state. There's this concept of the green state that some political scientists have presented as a potential outlook. But of course, at this moment, even though in China there's a so-called ecological civilization official policy, there's still very much the notion of de-linking that is on the minds of a lot of policymakers on both sides of the Pacific. So to what extent can we imagine a relational politics being mapped onto these state formations?

[00:44:18] **Mark:** You mentioned that people have said the pandemic is perhaps a dress rehearsal for confronting the climate crisis, and I think if it is, we're all in a lot of trouble because from my vantage point, I feel that the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic was so circumscribed by geopolitical antagonism to China and one that not only was staked to a critique or demonization of the Chinese

state response but one that really lacked a lot of simple human empathy for Chinese people. I remember myself as a Chinese American in the early months of when here in the US, we were just starting to talk about what is this new virus that they found in China? Oh, Wuhan is locked down. There was very little, I think, solidarity, very little empathy. And I remember seeing one of my friends on Facebook—to bring in another media example—changed their profile to have one of those frames that Facebook puts out when different kinds of events or crises happen and put a filter on their profile photo that said, my heart is with Wuhan or something like that. I remember being so moved and also sad to see that because it was such a solitary expression of identification and solidarity with Chinese people, whereas I think if COVID had unfolded in a different country, we would have seen a very different type of response, both popularly and at the state level. I think that your call for the more solidaristic understanding of our shared futures is one very moving to me personally, and I think also really emphatically important for confronting these global crises that are so intertwined.

[00:46:16] **Delores:** Thank you again, Mark, Katy, and Fan for sharing your thoughts on this engaging book and its vital contribution to media studies, cultural studies, and Asian studies. Be sure to add Fan's book, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media, and Transpacific Entanglements*, published by University of Michigan Press, to your library. We'd also like to thank the entire *Positions* editorial and production team, along with our co producers Elaine Venter and Mark Nunes, whose work makes these episodes possible. And we also thank you, our audience, for your time and attention today. If you haven't already, make sure to subscribe to our podcast and join us for the next episode of *Positions*, where we will tackle other essential and engaging topics in cultural studies.

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Notes

1. Fan Yang, *Disorienting Politics: Chimerican Media and Transpacific Entanglements* (University of Michigan Press, 2024). ↩

2. Jake Sullivan, "Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Renewing American Economic Leadership at the Brookings Institution," April 27, 2023. Available at: *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-renewing-american-economic-leadership-the < https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-renewing-american-economic-leadership-the> . ↩

3. Sullivan, "Remarks." ↩

4. As of publication, the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act remains in place, effectively banning TikTok in the United States. However, an executive order issued by President Trump suspends enforcement of that act for 75 days. "Application of Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act to TikTok," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/application-of-protecting-americans-from-foreign-adversary-controlled-applications-act-to-tiktok < https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/application-of-protecting-americans-from-foreign-adversary-controlled-applications-act-to-tiktok> . ↩

5. "Jeffrey Sachs on 'China Collapse' Theory," *Global Insights on China's Economy*, CGTN, December 8, 2024, https://fb.watch/xjuSm3SqG3 < https://fb.watch/xjuSm3SqG3> . ↩

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AI Literacy and the Changing Digital Political Landscape

by Elizabeth Losh, Rita Raley, Delores B. Phillips, Reed Van Schenck and Stefania Milan | Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025), Positions

ABSTRACT Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's New Media and Digital Cultures Working Group Co-Host Reed Van Schenck discuss AI literacy, digital politics, and the 2024 US presidential election with authors Elizabeth Losh (William and Mary) and Rita Raley (UC Santa Barbara). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Stefania Milan.

KEYWORDS United States, artificial intelligence, digital media, politics

Positions, Season 2, Episode 2

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A note on our cover image for this episode: "Erica" and "Derek" (named by ChatGPT) are DALL-E-generated images depicting what ChatGPT offered as a response to the following prompt: "How would you describe a profile for the 'undecided voter' going into the 2024 presidential election in the United States? Provide two: one leaning toward the democratic candidate and one leaning toward the republican candidate." Image generated on May 13, 2025, using GPT-4o and DALL·E 3.

AI Literacy Won't Save Democracy—But Democratic Imagination Might

By Stefania Milan

With AI-generated content flooding political discourse, calls for "AI literacy" are growing louder. Citizens, we are told, need to learn how to spot deepfakes, verify sources, and think critically about the information they consume. This is true—but also deeply insufficient.

As this episode of *Positions* makes clear, the "perma-crisis" we face is not just about disinformation or algorithmic manipulation. It is about something broader: a breakdown in trust, participation, and community, and in our collective ability to imagine a shared future. AI literacy, in the conventional sense, won't fix that. To meet the moment, we must go deeper—reimagining how we learn, how we govern, and how we create knowledge together.

How do we build societal resilience in a time of political polarization, misinformation, AI-generated fakes, and algorithmic manipulation? I would like to offer two reflections that speak to a more systemic perspective, complementary to the overarching concern raised in this podcast, namely the need to rebuild the democratic imagination in the data-driven society. I first consider how people learn about technology and society, and how we might do so more effectively. Second, I reflect on the defensive attitude displayed by democratic institutions when it comes to the moral panics associated with the advance of AI in society. I conclude by calling for the integration of critical technological education with institutional reinvention—which might result in a renewed commitment to civic imagination and democratic renewal.

Let's Stop "Teaching;" Let's Start Co-Creating

Efforts to educate the public about AI—and how it shapes what we know and how we act—too often rely on a familiar but flawed model: experts teaching the uninformed. Yet research in behavioral economics and psychology suggests this approach rarely works and may even backfire, although the robustness of the evidence of this "backfire effect" remains contested.[1] People generally don't like being told they're wrong, biased, or uninformed—especially when it comes to politics. They tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence.[2] As a result, traditional literacy interventions, including debunking and fact-checking, can entrench views rather than shift them.

We need a fresh approach: rather than fantasizing about teaching AI literacy in traditional ways, we should co-create it with the people it's meant to serve. Echoing the spirit of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which framed education as a dialogical, liberating process fostering critical consciousness,[3] and Maria Montessori's emphasis on learning through experience and trusting the learner,[4] AI literacy must be participatory and dynamic. It should treat people not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active collaborators in making sense of the technologies shaping their lives. Education on technology must be lifelong, grounded in lived experience, and responsive to real-world concerns. It should be designed to empower—not to belittle or overwhelm.

Following Freire and Montessori, people learn not just through instruction, but by doing, discussing, and imagining together. If we want them to navigate the age of AI with confidence and a sense of ownership over our collective future, we must create spaces where they can do so on their own terms—spaces that empower rather than intimidate, include rather than alienate, and inspire rather than frustrate. While difficult conversations and moments of discomfort are necessary for growth, as Losh and Raley rightly note in this episode, we cannot afford to lose

people along the way. Disagreement should be an invitation to deeper engagement, not a trigger for alienation.

This is why, at a very fundamental level, AI literacy must also be an exercise in hope. People need more than information—they need to believe they can shape the world, not just endure it. They need to feel that their voice matters. Citizen science can play a vital role, especially when paired with hands-on engagement and playfulness. Through participatory labs, role-playing, storytelling, scenario-building, and prototyping, citizens and policymakers can jointly explore risks and challenges—but also envision and test alternative futures. These are not just exercises in education—they are exercises in democratic imagination. They equip people to say not only "this is broken," but "here's what could be." More importantly, they reaffirm that everyone still has a stake—and a say—in shaping what comes next.

Build Institutions That Learn

The problem is not just individual—it is institutional. Most public institutions were not built for an era in which opaque AI systems shape everything from public opinion to welfare allocation. And AI technologies, in turn, were not designed with democracy in mind. What's required is something more fundamental: to reimagine and rebuild the very infrastructure of democratic governance. If, as the guests and co-hosts of this episode insightfully noted, the ship of platform and AI regulation has already sailed, it is not too late to recast democracy itself. After all, democracy is not just a system of checks and balances—it is a system of exchange, learning, and iteration. What it needs now is not only accountability, but also humility and imagination. We should demand institutions that embody both.

How can institutions learn? By way of example, let's consider the rapidly growing gap in our understanding of the social costs of AI. We still know too little about how AI systems—and the messages they amplify and impose on unwitting users,

such as AI-generated content embedded in tools like Google Search—actually **land** in people's everyday lives. How do individuals interpret these outputs? What meanings do they make? What fears or hopes do they evoke?

Too often, knowledge we rely on—whether in public debate or policymaking—is anecdotal, speculative, or driven by moral panic. To move forward, we need new mechanisms that embed data-informed, real-world learning directly into policymaking. These might include citizen panels or living labs, where diverse groups engage with emerging technologies in structured settings. But they also include lab experiments or quasi-experimetal setups that capture how AI technologies shape meaning, behavior, and trust. Such approaches can generate evidence that goes far beyond metrics. Only then can institutions adapt in ways that are both informed and democratically legitimate—aligned with lived experiences of the people they serve.

In short, we need to experiment more to gather data—with real people and real communities.

This resonates with a key point raised in this episode of *Positions*: done right, experimentation can open up democratic futures rather than foreclose them—if people and institutions are willing to engage in it in open-ended ways. As the podcast emphasizes, politics is ultimately an exercise in imagining the future. It needs new data points—not just predictions rooted in past preferences and behaviors like those served by platforms.

In a lecture I delivered with behavioral economist Joël van der Weele at the University of Amsterdam, we argued for a commitment to experimentation in the public sector—not just as a technical method, but as a vital democratic practice able to "upcycle democracy": that is, to creatively repurpose and strengthen existing democratic institutions and practices, making them more resilient, inclusive, and responsive to contemporary challenge—without discarding their core values.[5]

Yet three key challenges stand in the way. First, policymakers are often reluctant to experiment, because real experimentation is slow, politically risky, and demands a willingness to learn from failure, even when outcomes challenge political agendas or campaign promises. Second, as political scientist Virginia Eubanks has shown, experimentation with algorithmic systems often comes at the expense of marginalized and impoverished individuals and communities.[6] Third, AI technologies carry embedded ideologies that reflect the industrial cultures in which they are developed —as well as the concentration of power surrounding them. And yet, as the swift political recalibrations by tech executives following the 2024 Trump election make clear, state power remains central—in other words, policymaking (still) matters.

Nevertheless, with proper safeguards and full transparency, public experimentation could yield invaluable knowledge to inform better regulation, more effective literacy initiatives, and more equitable design of digital infrastructures. It can empower policymakers to shape the infrastructural and institutional design of AI systems—and counter the tendency to universalize insights drawn from a privileged few to the broader public.[7] This is why we proposed the creation of national institutes for policy experimentation and evaluation—to centralize expertise, improve standards of evaluation, and embed a culture of democratic experimentation across all levels of government.[8]

It may be costly and slow. And yet, if democracy is to evolve alongside AI, we must take that risk. We need institutions capable of asking hard questions, tolerating uncertainty, and adapting based on real evidence from diverse communities—not just click-through rates or engagement metrics that platforms offer. Institutions that learn do not just monitor; they evolve—with and through the people they serve.

Democracy Needs Imagination

There is a fundamental problem with these proposals: both AI literacy and democratic renewal require a different kind of public—one made up of curious, proactive, and self-driven individuals attuned to the common good. But such engagement does not emerge in a vacuum. The platform society, with its focus on consumption, hyper-personalization, and passive interaction, actively undermines it.

To nurture a more critical and engaged public, we need environments that foster curiosity and critical thinking, encourage participation, and reward engagement. This means rethinking not only civic education, but also redesigning the digital, institutional, and cultural infrastructures that shape how people encounter, interpret, and respond to technological change.

In the post-rational deliberative turn in politics, AI literacy cannot just be about spotting deepfakes or understanding how algorithms work. It is about fostering a sense of agency, and a society where people believe they still have the power to shape the future. It is about believing we, as individuals and communities, still have a voice in shaping what comes next. That is the real literacy crisis we face—not merely a lack of information and knowledge about how complex technologies work and affect our daily lives, but a deficit of imagination and collective power.

We won't fix the democracy crisis with more fact-checking or digital hygiene alone. Likewise, we cannot simply "lecture" our way out of this critical moment. While these tools have value, they are unlikely to reach everyone or spark the systemic change we need. What we can do is create new spaces for learning, governing, and experimenting—together. What we need is a full-on democratic reset: one that empowers people to reflect, to challenge, and above all, to imagine the future on their own terms. That is how we begin to rebuild democracy for the age of AI.

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] Delores Phillips: Welcome to *Positions*, the podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the open source journal *Lateral*. *Positions* aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* journal on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

In today's episode, I'm joined by the CSA New Media and Digital Cultures working group co-chair Reed Van Schenck. In a conversation with Elizabeth Losh, author of *Selfie Democracy*, published in 2022 by MIT press, and Rita Raley, author of *Tactical Media* and co-editor of the recently published special issue of the journal, *American Literature*, entitled "Critical AI: A Field Information."

Today we discuss AI literacy, the 2024 election, and finding a way forward in a changing digital political landscape. Enjoy the discussion.

[00:01:01] **Reed Van Schenck:** My name is Reed Van Schenck. I am an Assistant Professor of Marketing and Communication at IE University in Madrid, and I'm also co-chair of the New Media and Digital Cultures working group at the Cultural Studies Association, and my research focuses on reactionary digital networks, publics, and infrastructures in the United States.

[00:01:23] **Elizabeth Losh:** I'm Liz Losh. I'm the Dittman Professor of English and American Studies at William and Mary with a specialization in new media ecologies. I'm currently co-chairing the MLA/CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI. My last book was *Selfie Democracy* from MIT Press. It focused on the use of digital technologies in the White House. So it was a book about both Barack Obama and Donald Trump, looking at them together.

[00:01:49] **Rita Raley:** My name's Rita Rayley. I'm joining this conversation from Southern California. I'm a Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I also have [00:02:00] appointments in Film and Media Studies, some other departments, but primarily my work is in computational culture. I'm especially interested in the politics and aesthetics of these new tools and techniques.

[00:02:12] **Delores:** And I'm your host. I'm Dolores Phillips. I am the Director of the African American and Diaspora Studies Center and Associate Professor at James Madison University. Before we get started, let me note that we are having this conversation on November 8th, 2024, just three days after the election. I think we'd like to begin with what AI literacy means and what role AI literacy may have played in the most recent election.

[00:02:38] **Rita:** The literacy question that this is a—it's broader, but—this is something I've been thinking about for some time alongside of and with Liz for probably decades now, of course, people want to say that literacy is the wrong concept or paradigm to be thinking in these terms. We're obviously not dealing with book culture or print culture. So then what does one mean? Education, [00:03:00] familiarity, technical savvy, know-how, expertise: there are all these cognate concepts that come into play. In some ways it reinforces this expert/amateur distinction that is for some time been fraught and, and it's fraying. So it just seems strange to reinstate this notion of expertise. But I want to do it in the sense of an everyday or ordinary hands-on sense of basic familiarity, like operative awareness and knowledge.

[00:03:31] **Elizabeth:** I might argue that there's certain ways that people are asking AI literacy questions, or at least digital literacy questions when they're figuring out how to respond to a Facebook post that has got them agitated or something on X that's got them irritated, or a TikTok that is stuck in their craw in some way. I think that we are in a time of these sort of digital irritants where

people do need to at least [00:04:00] figure out how to not alienate their friend networks. I think that it's interesting to think about this election in the context of the fact that generative AI tools were integrated into Google Search just a few weeks before the election.

[00:04:21] **Elizabeth:** And so, for a lot of people when they were looking up information about the candidates, the first results that they would be seeing would be a generative AI summary of material on the internet. And one of the things I noticed about those summaries is that they were often inaccurate. So for example, I looked up what the highest military rank of J. D. Vance was, and it actually gave me the answer or Tim Walz rather than for J.D. Vance.

[00:04:51] **Reed:** I think that the way that people are interfacing with a lot of AI content to take the trope of AI slop, for [00:05:00] example, the sheer amount of space on a screen that Google Gemini takes up when somebody's looking for political content. To what extent does AI literacy need to engage with the sort of feeling of irritation that *this is in my way*—what I'm looking for is being blocked by a form of content that nobody seems to be asking for, and yet we just keep on receiving.

[00:05:27] **Elizabeth:** Yeah. There's a idea in traditional rhetoric about exigence, right? This idea that it's not that we engage rhetorically with the world because we have great thoughts that we formulate as leaders, but rather we are responding to something that is a call to speech, right? So that a lot of the time when we're performing rhetorically, that it's really reactive rather than active.

[00:05:58] **Delores:** There's been a good bit of what I've [00:06:00] been seeing that's been arguments over whether or not the image is even real, arguments about whether or not the post is even real. So there seems to be this distraction away from content and more toward modality: Is this actually a real image? And so we're arguing about this instead of actually engaging content anyway. Is that something that AI literacy might be able to address or to think about?

[00:06:27] **Rita:** That is really interesting. It is true: We're really bound up in these ontological questions, and of course you can't stabilize; that distinction, real/false, fell away with the simulacrum. So, generative AI is just an intensification and acceleration. And it does hold out this fantasy, the notion of a deep fake, the promise is that you can actually differentiate and articulate a difference with empirical evidence that you would say: This is false, this is real.

[00:06:58] **Rita:** But it is true, Dolores, your point [00:07:00] about the fact that we seem not to be thinking at the level of content any longer. In some ways I think it's less—if one imagine imagines it in geometric terms—it's less about where one cleaves the difference between the two, and more about the seemingly, relatively radical expansion of the space of the real, such that you, the area around the bell curve has expanded to the point that you now think this is a realist image—the Pope in a white puffer jacket is a realist image, right? So it's less: this is true/false, was he or was he not? And it's more the expansion of possibility and the sense in which now we see differently, precisely because that space of the realist image has expanded.

[00:07:51] **Delores:** I actually really like that reading because what ends up happening is when we're having your conversations about these images, about these posts, [00:08:00] about these tweets, whenever we're having these conversations and we're having a discussion about whether or not this is a real image or generated we're less interested in whether it's a real image, then what does the discussion do if this is a real image? What does it mean if this is a fake? How are we supposed to have the conversation about this, if this is a created artifact?

[00:08:21] **Elizabeth:** Yeah. One of the things I found really interesting is to see how Donald Trump and folks in the kind of Trump strategic orbit have embraced these AI images in which he's shown in these kind of heroic poses—it's Trump as a muscley superman. And so this kind of idea about heroism as it's defined in

comics or movies or other kinds of popular media, like they, his fans know that it's AI generated. But there's this [00:09:00] embrace of a kind of extrapolated heroism, imagined fantasy of this empowered figure that's going to somehow do battle for them that has this enormous currency—and sometimes literal currency in the form of NFTs.

[00:09:20] **Reed:** There's also a spectrum on it too. It's not just the production of AI content that's obviously generated and gets some of its currency from being obviously generated. There's also ones that are less obviously generated, but are still serving that purpose. I think about one of the most heavily circulated images after the Trump attempted assassination, which was in fact AI generated because you can see that he has six fingers in it and still people latched onto it. They use it as the best picture that was taken at the rally. And maybe that will get us to think in creative ways about the sort of post-rational or post-deliberative turn in [00:10:00] politics that people have been talking about pretty much since the original Trump campaign.

[00:10:04] **Reed:** It seems less so that we've completely abandoned rationality. But as Rita was discussing with the expansion of the real, it also seems as if we've been given a little bit of precarious room to have expanded ideas of what constitutes rationality. Not to mention quite a bit of disagreement on where they should start and where they should stop.

[00:10:29] **Rita:** There's this volumetric projection now. We're aware, now we're still looking at caricature. We're looking at types and figures, and tropes and templates, and generic formulas, but they've been volumetrically expanded and they've almost been animated, and it's not simply through animating technologies. I think it's because that's our life-world. If in some way that one dimensional hashtag presentation of a Photoshopped image in [00:11:00] 2015, 2016 was somehow distant from us still, now our life-world is just populated with. With synthetic imagery and stories and tropes.

[00:11:13] **Delores:** So what impact would that have on our understanding of democratic process and deliberative democracy?

[00:11:22] **Elizabeth:** I don't think we know yet, but I think there will be some interesting work to be done. So, for example, there's been a lot of work on AI and political polarization, and AI and political bias, and the ways that our very bifurcated society might be becoming more so thanks to AI-generated content. I'm working on a new project about thinking about campus activism, and one of the questions I'm interested in is: How is generative AI going to [00:12:00] change campus activism? So that's like a research question I can look at at my own campus.

[00:12:05] **Elizabeth:** So I'm interested in the question of campus activists who are now using these technologies to write speeches, to write press releases, to write mass emails, that they're using these technologies to research their positions. They might even be using these technologies to design protest signs and websites and other materials. So I'm trying to think about like a research question I can actually look at in my own sphere because I feel like so much of the time, the kind of work that we're doing as scholars of politics on the internet is we're taking this like 30,000 foot in the air view rather than looking at our own communities and thinking about how these technologies are changing the people that we see every day [00:13:00] and the way that they understand their everyday politics.

[00:13:03] **Rita:** We are approaching near complete universal—and put that in quotation marks—implementation and application such that these tools are unavoidable if you're actually working in a computational environment in any way whatsoever. Which is to say like I do think we're looking at an epistemic shift, right? Underlying all of this, I think are fundamental technological transformations. Negotiating this new environment that is medial, social, technical, cultural, political, etc., does in some ways require leveraging the tools and concepts and

institutions that have served the world well and also served it ill, but served it well for some time.

[00:13:45] **Rita:** AI literacy—to bring this back—the educational apparatus has developed tools that are still worth preserving, it's true. But I think if we don't develop new tools that are adequate to, responsive to and in fact [00:14:00] emerging from this new technological landscape, then we are not going to be able to navigate this uncharted—so far—territory.

[00:14:08] **Rita:** So yes, I would like to think: Bring back deliberative, rational democratic processes, bring back regulation. But I think that ship has sailed. The project of regulation, the project of stabilization, and returning to that reverse trajectory is itself a nostalgic fantasy of restoration and repair. So sometimes I feel —and there are a lot of reasons to feel despair—but I feel despair and dismay, especially this week, and in the 72 odd hours after the election, and I feel like people still do not understand what happened. And of course, it's a permacrisis, it's polycrises, but there are ways in which you can diagnose the situation, and I have yet to see people [00:15:00] understand the really profound role that media and technological systems had on this election. We're still speaking in such antiquated terms as if we're fighting about issues again in some sort of antiquated way. Like we're in a public sphere and we're all watching Cronkite. How could we not have understood still what role these social media platforms had on changing hearts and minds?

[00:15:30] **Reed:** And which social media platforms at that too. I feel like a major shift between the 2012 & 2016 election cycles and this current one is where different audiences are plugging into social media. When we think about alternative platforms, for example, they tend to be more likely to highly integrate AI—for example Elon Musk's Twitter/X behemoth with Grok. There is a white supremacist platform called Gab that has [00:16:00] its own artificial intelligence system that actually mimics characters under this idea of an AI philosophy in

which AI cannot be said to represent individuals, but they instead have to have specific characteristics such as like Jesus AI or Hitler AI.

[00:16:17] **Reed:** It seems like an area that media studies hasn't really talked about are these competing ideologies behind AI that technically go into the parameters that shape large language models, but also shape discourses of how AI should be implemented, how it should be informing the polis, and the lack thereof.

[00:16:38] **Delores:** It leads me to a project that I'm currently working on where I'm looking at how to generate a flagging model for biases in using different AI tools, applying these flagging models to these LLMs, for example, to flag bias as an instructional mechanism for students to learn how to actually [00:17:00] engage with and how to actually identify these points of entry.

[00:17:02] **Delores:** How do we see prompt injection as introducing a peculiar, human element that ends up being untouchable by some of the strategies that are obviously needed to reign in some of AI's worst features in terms of how it's being used, but also tap into the kind of promise that I think I'm hearing lurking beneath Rita's avowed statement of despair, when you're talking about how these things are productive of a moment that we cannot tame?

[00:17:37] **Rita:** So a colleague of mine actually has a really sharp paper on the use of prompt injection for image generation, and it's as if you were to use DALL-E 3, for instance, at this point, and you were to ask for a picture of scientists working in the lab, etc., you would get a picture with women, you would get people of [00:18:00] color. And of course you recognize historically the probability of seeing the woman in the lab is less than you would seeing a white man and so forth. And it's prompt injection, of course, right? So that you're able then to get a certain representation that the data just by pure statistical calculation, would not generate right.

[00:18:21] **Rita:** Because the norm, the default, the baseline is going to be a certain type of caricature. So there's an interesting way in which prompt injection—technically, again, it's post-processing—can be used or leveraged for the correction of biases or the correction of, or the kind of insurance of a something like equity, fantastic as it may be, but of course it can be used for nefarious purposes as well.

[00:18:50] **Elizabeth:** Maybe one thing to say about how these statistical models work is that they extrapolate [00:19:00] based on past data and you are going to get material, if there isn't the human moderator, that will replicate the biases and patterns of the past so that it's very difficult to get something that might be imagining a future that isn't predicated on the past unless you have that kind of human intervention.

[00:19:41] **Elizabeth:** Politics is a future-focused activity in a lot of ways, even if it's often connected to past imaginaries or present miseries, or that there is this idea that we're imagining this America of the future for the next four years, every time we vote for president, and that it is a kind of a statistical projection that we're doing in our own heads about what the [00:20:00] future is going to be like if we make a given political choice, and that models can give us some simulations of what that future might look like. But, as Rita and I know, you know, this is a pretty fraught process.

[00:20:16] **Elizabeth:** I think the other thing I'd mention is guardrails and human moderation. So I'm interested in situations where the prompt won't give you any output. Where, if you ask ChatGPT to give you the formula for ricin, right, it will say no, although you can get around that. So I am interested, actually, in when I'm testing prompts, I'm seeing fewer guardrails, and so I'm thinking that a lot of these AI companies really have, they want to give the customer what the customer wants, even if what the customer wants is something that's [00:21:00] toxic or unpleasant or harmful. And so I'm seeing, I don't know what you're

seeing, Rita, but I'm seeing a lot more—it's a lot easier to get around guardrails. I feel like when I test out the prompts that used to get me nothing, that now I'm able to get a recipe for a bad tasting cookie, or a job description for a pirate, or all the things that before ChatGPT would say: No, I can't give you that because it's unethical and harmful.

[00:21:28] **Rita:** This conversation about prompting and prompt injection is bringing me back to a place we started with the discussion of AI literacy. Okay, so in some ways, I think the question about literacy is better framed as, or at least for me: What is the one thing you wish people understood about AI machine learning? Like concretely, what basic point do I wish we could all understand? Could we be on the same page with one idea? And the one idea is a really simple one. It's not an [00:22:00] idea. It's just a, it's an operative principle, and that is that whatever observation you might make about a model, how it's behaving, what it's doing, does not hold if you scale up or scale down, or if you look at a different application or implementation.

[00:22:17] **Rita:** Prompt injection is a technique. It's been decided upon in a corporate setting. There are people, stakeholders, decision makers, determining how they want consumers to read their images or receive their images or use their images. Not all image generators use prompt injection or allow for prompt injection. So too, with language models, there are all sorts of techniques, post-processing techniques, that will determine whether you're getting a personalized—the appearance of a personalized—chatbot, or in a university setting, one that's expressive of a sort of brand identity, educational, [00:23:00] institutional brand identity.

[00:23:02] **Rita:** I wish, in other words, that we were able to step away from the general statements about AI and machine learning—what language models do, what image generators do—and say: Okay, what is it about this model in this application? What were the decisions? What is the training data? What were the

decisions made about post-processing? And then can we think about what we want to see differently.

[00:23:27] **Delores:** So you're imagining a conversation that has a great deal more context with the specific tools and the specific models that we're actually using, and that until we get to that particular level of granularity that the conversation about AI is going to be misleading?

[00:23:44] **Rita:** I do think so. So in, in some ways just showing students different behaviors that result from the same prompt and then getting them to ask: Okay, why is it that I'm getting a different answer to this question? You know what? And then what [00:24:00] training data might be informing this model? What post-processing techniques are being used in this other context? That can be an extremely illuminating discussion. It's basic A/B testing as well, right? The compare, contrast.

[00:24:15] **Elizabeth:** That spirit of experimentation and play is really important when it comes to helping students understand these technologies, and it's one of the things that, you know, speaking on behalf of the Task Force, we've gotten a lot of pushback from faculty on. That they feel like in the college setting, they don't want to engage with these platforms that have these environmental policies or labor policies or privacy policies that they don't like, and so they really don't want to do the kinds of exercises that you're talking about, which are the kind of [00:25:00] exercises I do in my classrooms as well.

[00:25:03] **Reed:** I think that this ethos of experimentation, or just the desire to try—mess around and find out—with generative AI is very optimistic. It's a hopeful way of looking at it, because if this is on our plates. Then we have to work with the conditions that we're given in order to educate our students, but also outside of a university context, to engage media politics on the terrain that media politics is happening in the world.

[00:25:33] **Reed:** I just got back from the Association of Internet Researchers Conference in Sheffield, and there the DISCO Network, which is a very cool digital media working group in the States, was talking about their new concept of technoskepticism, which I found really illuminating. And the way they define it is: learning from the way that marginalized communities in particular will conditionally accept and refuse certain uses of [00:26:00] technology in order to further their survivance in order to further resistance.

[00:26:04] **Elizabeth:** One of the things that's interesting to think about is: What can we do imagining different kinds of familial, friend and community context where people can have this, these kinds of experiences? We're always encountering these highly personalized media experiences, and I think the more that we have this kind of opportunity to have collective media experiences, particularly around generative AI, I think that it really is illuminating in a way that nothing else is because we have this sense of intimacy with our devices. And I think that we need to experiment with sharing these experiences of intimacy in more collective community contexts.

[00:27:00] **Elizabeth:** This is one of the things I'm trying to think about: What can we do to bring in community members, churches, K-12, veteran groups. I think there are a lot of things that could be done to think about broader communities rather than just academia.

[00:27:21] **Rita:** I want to take this conversation about experimentation back to the early days of Kamala's run. There were two things that I thought at that point that the campaign really understood, and that Democrats understood themselves, and that is that Trump was an influencer, and the only way to combat influencer capital is with celebrity capital.

[00:27:42] **Rita:** The second thing I thought they understood is that experimentation had to be leveraged in the open-ended sense. Like, rather than thinking about predefined, prescribed uses of TikTok or any other platform, you

had to let people loose and [00:28:00] just try to see what worked. And there was a moment when it seemed like the Kamala HQ accounts were being run by teenagers, kids that had just been let loose and told to experiment and it, and there was a sense of exuberance, a little bit of irrationality and play. And therefore you felt hopeful, like maybe something's going to come of this. Maybe they're going to figure out how to exploit and use, for different purposes, these tools and techniques. Eventually, someone came in and gave them a script, right? And that moment of experimentation and whatever possibilities it might have opened up was foreclosed, and they were like back on doing talking points. The moment of experimentation disappeared.

[00:28:51] **Delores:** The tenor of those first heady days of the campaign, especially when they were taking advantage of virality, when they were taking advantage [00:29:00] of the kinds of discourses that proliferate among these different kinds of subcultures that animate the internet—I think that characterizing that as experimentation that quickly lapsed into political campaigning orthodoxy was, I think, a very accurate way to describe what seemed like the collapse of a certain kind of tenor that at first made the campaign seem an incredibly exciting opportunity. What level of trust do you think this signified and younger content creators and what they see as campaigning versus what the new generation was experimenting with?

[00:29:39] **Elizabeth:** *In Selfie Democracy*, I interviewed a lot of people who were involved in Obama's campaign, and who were folks who were part of this group called Blue State Digital, and the people running that company were recent college grads and a lot of the people involved in that company [00:30:00] were teenagers, essentially. They were college interns.

[00:30:04] **Elizabeth:** And that carried all the way on into the White House. I interviewed a guy who taught Valerie Jarrett how to tweet. Who was 19 at the time, right? So he's like a 19-year-old talking to Obama's Chief of Staff about how

to use Twitter. And I think that we're just not at that moment anymore. There's not this trust of young people that we saw at the beginning of the Obama era, and I think that Obama was a flawed candidate and a flawed president in many ways. But I do think that trust in young people is something that allowed Obama to be a successful candidate for president. I think it's true that the Harris campaign just didn't trust them.

[00:30:56] **Rita:** One thing that strikes me still is that [00:31:00] overwhelmingly, I think, the power of that television ad that the Trump campaign ran—the anti-trans television ad—that they ran over and over again. Like in some ways you think, wow, we are right back with the "Daisy" ad. Who knew that television could still be so powerful?

[00:31:18] **Reed:** That ad was so powerful that Kamala Harris stopped defending trans people. I can never forget her line, I believe it was an NBC interview. Will you support trans people's right to transition? We're going to follow the law. Well, the law in Florida . . . . So that advertisement truly seemed—that broadcast style advertisement truly seemed so powerful that the Democratic campaign no longer trusted its base instincts, let alone its values, and it backpedaled towards attempting to appeal to this audience that, at the end of the day, is probably never going to vote for a candidate like Kamala Harris.

[00:31:55] **Rita:** One thing I also don't understand—another thing I don't understand—about the way that Democrats [00:32:00] ran this campaign is how they did not attend to Spanish language media. Who was attending Spanish language media? Where was the Kamala HQ in the Spanish language TikTok? Nowhere. And you just think: There is no counter to these narratives.

[00:32:15] **Elizabeth:** People roasted Trump's appearances on Spanish language television, and yet he was there.

[00:32:20] **Rita:** He was there. Yeah.

[00:32:22] **Elizabeth:** He was part of that media conversation.

[00:32:25] **Rita:** Exactly. And so to appearances, and this is an obvious thing to say as well, but it doesn't matter. It's back to the real/false distinctions that we were thinking about. It's all appearance. All the footage from the Trump rallies—there was this period where people felt gleeful, or some felt gleeful, thinking: Oh, everyone's leaving the rallies. They seem not to care. Look at all the empty seats. Then you realize: the metrics you're using to evaluate success in this instance, those metrics don't pertain anymore.

[00:32:55] **Elizabeth:** This is one of the arguments I make in *Selfie Democracy*, like people [00:33:00] who are going to these public events, it's not about the way it looks to the television camera. People might go to the event, shoot some selfies of themselves at the Trump rally. And yeah, they've got to get home, they've got to make dinner, they're going to go other places. Maybe they've got other things to do.

[00:33:18] **Elizabeth:** But that individual, narrowcasting of kind of solidarity with a particular kind of political identity isn't necessarily visible to a broadcast media camera. People shoot a selfie in a way that looks good, right? You have this ability to control and curate the experience so that it looks great from the thing that you are shooting. And so the fact that there is this actual reality of empty seats doesn't matter, right? [00:34:00] I'm going to make wherever I'm at look great or look horrible, depending on my mood, but I can make it look a particular way because I control the camera angles. And I think you have to understand that a Trump rally is thousands of people who can control the camera angles.

[00:34:19] **Reed:** Speaking of selfie democracy, or maybe in this case selfie authoritarianism, I can't help but think about January 6th, which seemed, as we now know, was not very important to the American electorate, truthfully. It certainly did not stop the majority of Trump voters from showing back up, and if certainly did not mobilize the Democratic party to go to the polls, seeing as how

the Democrats lost, it's looking like it's going to be about 12 million voters, if not more, for a litany of reasons. But in any case, in January 6th, of course, we know that a lot of the evidence for the prosecution, as [00:35:00] well as propaganda for the right, after the fact, comes from people who recorded themselves and took selfies in the Capitol building as this kind of triumphal moment.

[00:35:14] **Elizabeth:** One of the things I thought was interesting about January 6th is that it was really an attack on representative government in the minds of a lot of Trump supporters, that it wasn't an attack, that it's been reconfigured as not being.

[00:35:28] An attack on individual legislators, which it very much was. People were yelling, "Hang Mike Pence," right? People were calling for the death of Nancy Pelosi. It was political violence that was aimed at individuals, that it was murderous incitement to commit political violence against individuals,

[00:35:52] **Rita:** But at the same time, it was still a media event—hence the mock guillotine, as many people have remarked. It was performance, it was [00:36:00] spectacle, and it was all staged for re-presentation and reproduction and dissemination throughout media environments. So of course, there is a brutal materiality to that day, but at the same time, media spectacle in some ways is the takeaway.

[00:36:21] **Delores:** I was struck by how you were speaking about the material, the sort of brutally material aspects of this, which included the literal danger to bodies, literal death, the materiality of excrement on a desk, the materiality of taken objects that were then disseminated elsewhere, outside of the Capitol, as almost these trophies for sale. But the way that you're speaking too, about how spectacular the event was, and how the spectacle of it was circulated through media environments and seemed almost tailor-made for it, does that lead us to a sensibility of a dematerialized citizenship? One [00:37:00] where our involvement in the body politic is less about materiality and more about spectacular images?

[00:37:08] **Rita:** The revolution must be live streamed, right? Like we had already seen mass murders that were live streamed. So, the participation as an audience member in these things, if you think of it as an audience number, is bodily. Like people are affectively, corporeally deeply invested in the horrific events that they're watching. It's hard to sustain the material/immaterial when you're dealing with people's profound affective investments in what they're watching unfold on their screens.

[00:37:41] **Elizabeth:** And I'm mindful of another moment of political violence that we've had recently, which was the assassination attempt on Donald Trump's life, and the ways that people wore those bandages, this bodily imitation of the sort of [00:38:00] wound of the savior as a kind of ritual act. The need to reconstitute the bandage is fascinating to me. And I think people on the Left who are mocking it, were not understanding its semiotic power, and that kind of machismo that was associated with standing up and raising your fist after an act of political violence.

[00:38:29] **Reed:** It seems like there might be three different relationships between materiality and spectacle at play here. On the one hand, we have folks pooping on desks, performatively wearing these bandages, people that are opting into the materiality in order to co-perform the spectacle in the cases of people like Trump. On the other hand, we have let's maybe your Democratic operative folks that are trying their best to disavow the spectacle, but are just not willing to admit how [00:39:00] much material power it truly has.

[00:39:00] **Reed:** And then I think what cannot be lost is the category of folks for whom this is always, already material, and they have no choice in whether they want to participate in it or not. And this calls to mind for me the Haitian population of Springfield, Ohio. Folks are literally being recorded because Project Veritas-style journalists are asking people to find evidence of Haitians eating cats and dogs. Those people have absolutely no choice in whether or not somebody is

going to hit them with a camera in their face while they're trying to enjoy their lunch.

[00:39:38] **Reed:** So in what ways, if we think about the semiotic power as well as the material power of this media, can we think through materiality as being an imposition, or on the other hand, spectacle as being a comfortable place where the privileged can enjoy it all?

[00:39:57] **Elizabeth:** Kat Tiidenberg has this [00:40:00] intersecting set of Venn diagrams. She's got three circles, and one is power, one is privilege, and one is visibility. And I think thinking about this question of how people with power and privilege can make themselves visible, but they can also choose to be invisible, while for a lot of people, they really are not allowed to have control over their own visibility, right? They are hypervisible, and they don't have that capacity to control how they're depicted.

[00:40:40] **Rita:** And another way to think about the example of the Haitian immigrants is to go to QAnon, which is surprising we haven't brought this up yet, but what does at play in all of these situations is this insistent need [00:41:00] to actualize or materialize the virtual, right? So, you have the narrative. There's a sex ring being run in a basement of a pizzeria. Immigrants are eating animals. And then one needs to find the truth of this, but it's not simply to discover, it's actually to instantiate. There's this weird desire to actualize the narrative. It's not about revelation, it's about manifestation and production.

[00:41:31] **Delores:** Let's bring this back to, I think it was 2017 with a fact is whatever fits or manifests the narrative itself, but you have a roster of alternative facts. So I don't have the facts, I have the alternative facts. There's this whole other dimension of experience that is informing these decisions and perspectives, that is housed in conspiracy thinking, that's housed in disinformation, that's housed in getting back [00:42:00] to our very beginning of the conversation, a certain lack of media literacy.

[00:42:04] **Rita:** The larger picture here, of course, must be the fraying of expert culture or the belief in expert culture. Doctors are not to be trusted. Think about Fauci and so forth. Certainly not educators and political figures. No one, in fact, who has an informed opinion is somehow to be trusted: I'm going to do my own research, right? So the bigger story here is about the collapse of expertise or the reformulation or reconfiguration of expertise such that we all have it because we're all able to do our own research, supposedly.

[00:42:42] **Elizabeth:** Yeah. And most of us here are old enough to remember the nineties and all of this celebration of the internet for its leveling effects, right? This is going to be so great for democracy because everyone was going to be finally equal. With [00:43:00] these media, you'd be equal to a journalist, you'd be equal to your elected representative. You would have all of this power to access the media. This would be so fantastic! And of course, Rita and I and Mark and a bunch of other people were like, I don't know . . . . It might not work out that way.

[00:43:20] **Delores:** So what difference are we perceiving between our moment right now in 2024 versus 2020 or 2016?

[00:43:30] **Elizabeth:** with the advent of generally available generative AI tools, there is this incredible, computational complexity in the media environment that people are encountering. And I was thinking about the right wing belief that like the Democratic party controls Siri. That's a lot [00:44:00] simpler an explanation than what actually controls Siri. Trying to explain to a student what controls Siri is actually pretty complex because there's so many different things layered. The stack is pretty complex that you're talking about there, and this simpler explanation for these really complicated environments—I can understand why it's appealing.

[00:44:34] **Rita:** When we were thinking in 2016 about the manipulation of our media environments, we were always anchoring it, or the conversation seemed to anchor it In figures or institutions or agencies. The IRA, what is happening in

Manila, and so forth. QAnon? Obviously. Like, who's the mystery? Who's behind it, who spun the tail? I think the realization now is that the [00:45:00] originator, even though we're deeply interested, who's Satoshi, etc., like who's the originator of these things, all that matters is the seed, like the fact of the seed, and then things proliferate. It's less important to trace it back to a source, right? Because you don't need to trace it back to a source. You have this kind of free floating circulation of stories, of mythos, of ideas, and I don't know that the one directionality that was promised by the troll farm, it originates here and then it comes to us. Now I think it's just pure circulation in an interesting way.

[00:45:38] **Reed:** It's important to discuss the media ecology that allows the content that troll farms produce to be circulated, disseminated, and received as if not real content, certainly trustworthy enough for large swaths of the population to be making their decisions. I really do think that there are [00:46:00] distinct media ecosystems from which people are getting their content. For example, WhatsApp groups have not been discussed about nearly enough in the context of the American electorate in no small part because it's largely non-white populations that are using WhatsApp groups, people with large groups of friends and family that exist outside of the United States. I only started using WhatsApp when I moved to Madrid, and now I'm only getting a sense of the impossibility of tracing where something came from and to whom it has already been received.

[00:46:37] **Elizabeth:** It's funny to look at the founding discourses around Twitter. And how it was originally imagined more as a kind of group text application than it was as something that would be part of the mainstream media cycle and be important for [00:47:00] journalism. And so it's interesting to think about how WhatsApp sort of scratches the itch for that kind of narrower notion of publics that allow for media sharing in an even more walled garden than a Facebook group.

[00:47:22] **Rita:** In the sense this another cause for despair, sorry, is just the way in which the tools that had been used for compelling, even, you might say liberatory political purposes have just been turned against us, if I think in terms of us/them. If I think twenty years ago about alternate reality games, and the very powerful use of these things—World Without Oil was one, right?—in order to, again, change hearts and minds, get people to imagine a future without fossil fuels. The premise is that you cannot [00:48:00] imagine a better future unless you try to enact it yourself. That promise—and it was a kind of utopian promise—has just dissipated, and the mobilization of these very same tools and techniques for destructive, you could say catastrophic, political purposes.

[00:48:22] **Elizabeth:** I was actually playing World Without Oil when I was at a conference in Europe. I think I was in the Netherlands, and it had just reached the point in the narrative where the planes had stopped flying because of the world without oil. And so I was like posting stuff like videos on YouTube: Help, I'm stranded in Europe at this conference and I can't get home. And all of these sort of random European strangers were like: Oh, we can take you in, Liz! You can stay with us, and you'll be fine. Here in the Netherlands, we have bicycles and we have a lot of [00:49:00] wind power and stuff. So, I do remember those days of this kind of imagined hospitality around the kind of world of LARPing.

[00:49:11] **Rita:** The beauty of the social at that point. It's now the mob.

[00:49:17] **Reed:** Actually, another thing we talked about at the internet studies conference—this was a point made by Dr. Catherine Knight Steele—is that it really is so easy in this point in time to wallow in despair and to criticize, but it is becoming so much harder to look for directions forward, and that's exactly what we're here for, it's what we need to be doing. What to think about. Again, this question of sociality, the vision that early ARG, LARPing, and maybe albeit misguided ideas of techno-publicity, the horizon of sociality that they were drawing towards . . . . It was certainly misguided in placing trust in platform

oligarchs, but what can we do to find that trust again in each other, in order to work forward, again, using the digital media environment that we have, but reframing the terms of order that we're called to use them in?

[00:50:12] **Rita:** I wouldn't discount the role of the aspirational or the speculative narrative, the end of *Children of Men*, the film version where they're going to the ship labeled Tomorrow, the end of Margaret Atwood's, *Oryx and Crake*: "Zero hour. Time to go." I do think that kind of open-ended aspiration to different futures that might be better that speculative fiction still trades in, I think that has to be a tool in the arsenal.

[00:50:47] **Rita:** Many people are talking about bioregionalism, thinking about a local, situated politics that's grounded in environment and community, and the actual sense of people that you meet and deal with on a daily basis, that seems to move toward a kind of disconnectivity or a fantasy of opting out or [00:51:00] removing oneself from the grid: it doesn't have to. I think the bioregional movement is really powerful, especially because it deals with history, like the history of the places, and it also works toward repair or restoration, but without these grotesque fantasies of an antiquated, idealized past that is obviously sanitized, right? You could still trade on or think about a history of a place without trying to imagine stripping away all that was really gruesome and awful about it, and thinking about what one wants to repair and recover going forward. Those are just two paths forward. I think there's not one path forward, nor is there just one tool. There can't be. It's a permacrisis, which means you need multiple solutions.

[00:51:52] **Elizabeth:** I also think, going back to our discussion of digital irritants, it's important to also think about digital comforts [00:52:00] and the fact that so many people now go to personalized media because they want comfort from political anxieties, about the climate, economic anxieties, and I think thinking about situations that can facilitate discomfort rather than irritants. And I've been thinking a lot about how the right wing has demonized DEI, because this is a

situation which people have to be uncomfortable in the workplace when they're called out for weaponizing their privilege in particular contexts. And so I think that thinking about how do we think about difference and not necessarily privileging interactions with [00:53:00] like-minded people. I worry that people on the Left, their feelings are hurt. And so there's a lot of sort of collective care work about the kind of misery of the loss of the election, rather than thinking about engaging in difficult conversations.

[00:53:25] **Elizabeth:** And I think those difficult conversations have to take place on the Left as well. So it's not just about sitting down with your Trump-voting siblings at Thanksgiving dinner. I think it's really also about, you know, thinking about how the divisions within the Left were weaponized as well, and that the differences that can go on within progressive movements, and the kind of solidarity that is not sameness.

[00:54:00] **Rita:** I was just thinking, can we come up with some operatic, summative statement that brings us forward into a bright new day?

[00:54:05] **Elizabeth:** I got nothing, man.

[00:54:12] **Rita:** Yeah, like the fight continues, right? That's the, we can't just give up. Everyone has to think about how to fight in their own way.

[00:54:21] **Delores:** Thank you again, Reed, Liz, and Rita for sharing your thoughts on AI literacy and politics. We'd also like to thank the entire *Positions* editorial and production team, along with our co-producers, whose work makes these episodes possible. And we also thank you, our audience, for your time and attention today.

[00:54:36] If you haven't already, make sure to subscribe to our podcast and join us for the next episode of *Positions* where we'll tackle other essential and engaging topics in cultural studies.

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Review of *Fighting Feelings: Lessons in Gendered Racism and Queer Life* by Gulzar R. Charania (University of British Columbia Press)

by Hannah Renda | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT In *Fighting Feelings: Lessons in Gendered Racism and Queer Life*, Gulzar R. Charania explores the gendered racialization of women of color through a plethora of interviews with her participants, paying specific attention to the intersection of identities that these women hold such as gender, race, sexuality, age, and socio-economic status. Charania centers the thoughts and experiences of racialized Black and women of color feminists to provide her readers with critical tools to navigate the lived experiences of racialized women while also acknowledging the violence of dominant narratives entrenched in white supremacy. By attending to the practices of scholars and theorists as well as the lives of her participants, Charania urges readers to reconsider the convergence of gender and sexuality in racialized hierarchies.

KEYWORDS psychology, race, sexuality, women's studies

Fighting Feelings: Lessons in Gendered Racism and Queer Life. By Gulzar R. Charania. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2023, 290pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-7748-6899-0. US List: $99.00.

> *"Can I write honestly? Not only about how much I've been hurt but how I have hurt others?"*
> –Cathy Park Hong

In *Fighting Feelings: Lessons in Gendered Racism and Queer Life*, Gulzar R. Charania engages theory with the lived experiences of her participants—Canadian

women of color whose specificities are revealed throughout the book, but whose demographic information is purposefully sparse—in an attempt to resist racialized singularity and to attend to the intersectional realities of women of color. At the forefront of her book, Charania seeks to reconfigure who is telling stories of racialization and *how* they are telling these stories—effectively decentering a white audience and bringing voice to the racialized women who have so often been left on the margins. For Charania, centering the thoughts and experiences of racialized Black and women of color feminists provides us with critical tools to navigate the lived experiences of racialized women while acknowledging the violence of dominant narratives entrenched in white supremacy. An interlocking analysis of power, provided by Charania and her participants, renders a space that emphasizes the obvious articulations of racial dominance, as well as articulations that are more unassuming. Shaped by the intersections of Black and women of color feminist thought, Black studies, and queer theories, Charania makes an effort to "understand and respond to the despair and privatization of racial harm in the lives of women of colour" (8). *Fighting Feelings* explores the universal yet unique experiences of racialized women in Canada that express gendered racialization within the world writ large.

Charania delineates the three anchors in the introduction that she seeks to uphold throughout her book: "Complicity and Complexity," "Emotions," and "Quiet." "Complicity and Complexity" accounts for the tension that is present within the lives of racialized subjects, attending to "racialized women's divergent strategies for survival . . . while also accounting for the constrained racial conditions in which people come to take up these practices" (17). "Emotions" centralizes the significance of emotions for both racialized girls and women, and for the women of color who reproduce the racialized violence they experience. The emotional burden of living as racialized girls and women comes with hurt but also provides a pathway to knowledge and resistance (19). In other words, "sometimes they [fight] feelings, and other times they [use] feelings to fight" (20). Finally, "Quiet" invites us to listen to the insights that the quiet can offer. The participants in the

book equip Charania with the power of the quiet within their interviews. Both Charania and her participants ask us to "think not only about Black and racialized subjects who are publicly resistant but also about what can be learned and observed through and with the quiet" (22). These three anchors guide us through *Fighting Feelings* in a way that allows reconsideration of the convergence of gender and sexuality in racialized hierarchies.

Fighting Feelings is divided into five body chapters. Chapter one, "Riding People, Reading Life: Methodological Commitments," foregrounds the methodological guidance within the succeeding chapters of the book. Prefacing the chapters to come, "Riding People" reconsiders academia's role in the lack of commitments to the prioritization of the lives of racialized people—specifically racialized girls and women. This chapter asks us to defy categorization that disallows us from grappling with the damage of racial domination and its consequences. In effect, Charania preserves collective memory through the interviews and begins to rethink racialized subjectivity.

Chapter two, "Fragments, Feelings, Sometimes Words: From Memories to Racial Literacies," accounts for the formative experiences of racial violence within racialized women's adolescent experiences. This chapter is the first to include interviews with the participants. Charania makes the conscious decision not to provide background information about her participants as a means of avoiding exploitation of the participants' pain, or over-analysis of their backgrounds. This decision also leaves space for readers to draw connections to broader experiences of racial violence, while holding space for individual experiences throughout the book. Chapter two is divided into seven parts that speak to the range of feelings participants had during their first experience with racial violence. Within this chapter, Charania works through the elusiveness of racism, what it means to have explicit racial instruction, the effect of the privatization of feelings, the circulation of memory, and the unsolicited burden of racial hierarchies. Altogether, Charania demonstrates that "understanding racism is a form of

political knowledge" (56) and that love, in and of itself, is a form of political knowledge and expression as well (58).

The third chapter, "Lessons in Gendered Racism: Enduring Memories of School," explores the experiences of racialized girls and women in their encounter with peers, teachers, and school administration. Charania examines three large themes in this chapter. First, turning to critical race theorists, she addresses the challenges of a "post-racial" world that mystifies racial violence. Second, Charania focuses on "how people live with, decipher, and respond to the racial conditions of their lives" (85). Lastly, the chapter acknowledges that while measurements of academic success matter, they do not tell the complete story of schooling, especially in the context of a racialized society. Accounting for several of her participants' experiences with the school system, chapter three calls for the experiences of racialized girls to be more centered in educational studies.

Chapter four, "Quiet Queers: Gender, Sexuality, and Racial Formation," works at the intersection of race and sexuality to provide a more expansive understanding of racial formation. Charania delves into the calibration of risk involved in the lives of racialized women, specifically racialized queer women. Charania considers the stories of three participants in order to "illuminate the reasons why queer racialized girls can so easily go missing, particularly in high schools" (147). While the majority of the book focuses on the adverse experiences of girls and women of color in relation to white supremacy and racial domination, this chapter harkens "interdisciplinary conversations, commitments, and crossings between critical race, feminist, and queer scholars in education" to elucidate the complex lives of queer women of color (173).

The final chapter, "Canada: The Cost of Admission," describes the tensions between racialized women's lived experiences and Canada as a nation-state and agent of colonial violence in these women's narratives. Charania offers insights into racial literacy in Canada, amplifies her participants' accounts of their

encounters with Canada as a site of colonialism, and acknowledges the complexities of living within a nation-state that erases the experiences that are brought to life within *Fighting Feelings*. This chapter works to emphasize "the national constraints and conditions that defer, displace, or outlaw an analysis of racial and settler colonial logics as practices and realities in contemporary Canada" (224). Though speaking on behalf of her own country, by recognizing the national constraints and conditions of Canada, Charania reveals the same obstructions are found within nations throughout the world.

Charania concludes her book just as she started, with an anecdote that urges her readers to rethink the ordinary, to question our position within the world, and to really listen in the quiet. Drawing on the critical interventions of critical race, feminist, and queer scholars, the conclusion acknowledges the feat of remembering. Remembering is sometimes the most hurtful thing to participate in; however, Charania and her participants remember in order to protect and guide the racialized girls and women living within and outside of Canada. Charania tells us that the "tension between what we know, feel, and experience, on the one hand, and white authority to define the what, where, and how of racism, on the other hand, is at the heart of this book" (229). *Fighting Feelings* stands out for its inclusion of voices that have often been lost in the noise of this tension, and for its attention to the details that offer readers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of living in a racialized society. *Fighting Feelings* is relevant to those interested in education studies, race and ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies, asking readers to consider how the intersection of identities reflects the multiplicity of life that racialized girls and women experience throughout girlhood, schooling, and adulthood.

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Article details

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Review of *Marx for Cats* by Leigh Claire La Berge (Duke University Press)

by Rachael Mulvihill | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Leigh Claire La Berge's *Marx for Cats* reimagines the history of capitalism by analyzing archival documentation about felines. By updating bestiaries to include contemporary criticism of capitalism, La Berge positions cats as the key to an economic revolution. While the title and cover suggest a playful, possibly unserious analysis, La Berge carefully constructs a detailed history from feudalism to capitalism to point readers toward an animal-friendly future that reconsiders power structures and dares to imagine a world beyond capitalism.

KEYWORDS Marxism, animal studies, capitalism, class, cultural studies, ecocriticism, revolution

Marx for Cats: A Radical Bestiary. By Leigh Claire La Berge. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023, 408 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-1-4780-1925-1. US List: $27.95.

Are cats comrades? Leigh Claire La Berge poses this humorous question with full sincerity in her book, *Marx for Cats*. The book offers an eclectic approach to rethinking and reshaping the history of capitalism by placing cats at the forefront of that history alongside humans. Drawing from Marxist traditions and engaging what she calls the "feline archive" (2), La Berge urges readers to take a utopian "leap of faith" (335) toward an interspecies revolution, one that not only draws from historical references of cats in the shaping of "labor, money, and class struggle" (9), but that places cats at the forefront of a worker's revolution alongside humans. La Berge's book demonstrates how, by the twentieth century,

“cats emerge as potent symbols against capitalism domination” (254), with wildcats associated with strikes and insurrections and the domestic black cat aligned with workers’ “energy and power” (161) to stage rebellion against oppressive capitalist regimes.

As a cat owner and student of utopian studies, I approached *Marx for Cats* with an open mind and was instantly charmed by the plethora of cat photographs littered throughout La Berge’s book. Broken down into four sections organized through dialectics and arranged in the form of a “*radical* bestiary,” La Berge uses archival drawings, poem, and photos—such as the image of a human fist raised in the air alongside a cat paw—to nudge both newbies and established scholars to a view that “takes animals seriously” (14). La Berge’s “radicalness” lies in how she subverts or transforms the tradition of bestiaries to dismantle contemporary power structures. In simple terms, *Marx for Cats* is a utopian text that reveals the revolutionary work that felines—lion, panther, tiger, lynx, and domestic cat alike—have achieved, from feudalism to capitalism.

Beginning with the feudal period, La Berge’s first section, “Menace and Menagerie,” details how lions became symbols of power and empire while the domestic cat became associated with “elements of social disorder” (53). She calls this the “lion-cat dialectic,” thus reframing the history of capitalism through the domestic cat. While the lion represents productivity under capitalism, the domestic cat represents the lowest of the class order. Aligned with the devil, witchcraft, and everything “suspect” (75) the domestic cat symbolizes everyday forms of labor that are overlooked under capitalism. This initial dialectic establishes her overarching argument that by analyzing cats throughout history, we uncover realities and lived experiences that capitalism has deemed mundane and unimportant.

This idea carries over in part two, “Lion Kings.” Here she details the “tiger-tyger dialectic” as a reimagining of socialist thought alongside the image and symbol of

the tiger. To do so, La Berge introduces the notion of *tigersprung,* or the "tiger's leap." Adapted from Walter Benjamin, La Berge posits "the tiger's leap" as a jump back in history that enables a reordering of the present and future. In other words, the tiger acts as a landing spot in history to offer a fresh look at capitalism. The best example La Berge offers is the leap made during the Haitian Revolution. In La Berge's words, the revolution "leapt up through the collective consciousness of a group of radical tigers" and yet went largely unrecognized by historians until C.L.R. James reconstructed it "through the archive of the tiger" (169). By analyzing "spacing, capitalization, and repetition" (169) of tigers in speeches and journals from revolutionaries like Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, James highlighted how the leap was important for social change. La Berge picks up this conversation. She argues that histories "silenced, overlooked, and destroyed" (169) by capitalism and racism can be revived through the image of the tiger. For La Berge, the tiger, when aligned with Marxist history, has the power to inspire a real-world utopia.

Part three, "The Feline Call to Freedom," and part four, "Our Dumb Beasts" discuss the "cat-mouth dialectic" and the "cat-comrade dialectic" respectively. Each chapter within these section offers a critique of unregulated capitalism and aligns cats with forces of liberation. La Berge argues that by the mid-nineteenth century, cats were used to realize, stabilize, and critique "money, technology, control of land, and forms of culture" (179–80). She offers the wildcat as a historical example, and details the ways in which violence toward wildcats provided both concrete economic opportunities and, in the abstract, symbolized concerns for the welfare of children, factory workers, slaves, and animals arising from the Industrial Revolution. La Berge then returns to her argument about the leap and reasserts the importance of feline visibility with more archival material such as Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, "The Masque of Anarchy," drawing attention once more to the "lives and doings [that] remain invisible" (197). Shelley's poem drives La Berge's point that animals, namely cats, have been

aligned with anarchist, revolutionary ideologies throughout capitalism's long history.

It is important to note that while La Berge focuses on lions, tiger, and wildcats, she also draws attention to other animals, like the dog. She contends that a reimagining of capitalism must include moral respect for all animals. Some readers might groan at her push for vegetarianism, but La Berge's passionate detailing of a future that respects wildlife's habitats is compelling: instead of imagining ruin, La Berge urges readers to change their imagination and leap toward interspecies Marxism. Towards that end, the book demonstrates how, by the twentieth century, "cats emerge as potent symbols against capitalism domination" (254), with wildcats associated with strikes and insurrections and the domestic black cat aligned with workers' "energy and power" (161) to stage rebellion against oppressive capitalist regimes.

While the length of the chapters might discourage novice readers, La Berge's text is an important starting point for Marxist scholars, cultural theorists, and animal studies scholars to think beyond the limitations of capitalism. Ultimately, the book acts as a guide toward a better future: a future that places felines at the forefront of economic revolution, paw-in-hand with humans.

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Rachael Mulvihill is a PhD Candidate in Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University. Her research examines utopian and dystopian representations of capitalism across contemporary fiction, film, and media. She focuses on how these narrative forms imagine, critique, or reproduce the socio-economic logics of neoliberalism, revealing how capitalism conditions embodiment, labor, and

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View all of Rachael Mulvihill's articles.

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Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Violent Intimacies: The Trans Everyday and the Making of an Urban World* by Aslı Zengin (Duke University Press)

by Avik Sarkar | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Aslı Zengin's *Violent Intimacies* theorizes the fraught encounter between the Turkish state and its trans subjects. Introducing the analytic framework of "violent intimacies," Zengin advances two main claims: structural violence unfolds through intimate contact with gendered bodies, and trans women, in turn, confront this violence with intimate practices of resistance. Zengin's work marks a significant intervention within trans studies. She pays close attention to the materiality of the body as the location where violence is both enacted and contested—a welcome departure from the tendency towards abstraction in trans theoretical production. She also pushes the field in transnational directions to address experiences of gender transgression beyond North America and Western Europe. A rich ethnography of trans life in Turkey, the text depicts everyday scenes of violent intimacies across several interpersonal and institutional settings: the street, police, medicine, law, and family. *Violent Intimacies* offers a vibrant account of Turkish trans women who—faced with state neglect and social exclusion—envision alternative ways of building worlds and sustaining life.

KEYWORDS Turkey, ethnography, intimacy, trans studies, violence

Violent Intimacies: The Trans Everyday and the Making of an Urban World. By Aslı Zengin. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2024, 296 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-2562-7. US List: $27.95.

Violent intimacies: an oxymoron? If intimacy is world-forming, then violence is world-shattering. In her new book, Aslı Zengin engages the productive tension

between violence and intimacy to theorize the fraught encounter between the Turkish state and its trans subjects. Introducing the analytic framework of "violent intimacies," Zengin advances two main claims: structural violence unfolds through intimate, corporeal, visceral contact with gendered bodies; and trans women, in turn, resist this violence with intimate practices of kinship, sociality, and belonging. Zengin's work marks a significant intervention within trans studies. A uniquely interdisciplinary study, *Violent Intimacies* brings the field into generative conversation with urban geography, the political anthropology of violence, and transnational feminist and queer critique. Zengin also contributes to the ongoing project of expanding the scope of knowledge production in trans studies by attending to experiences of gender transgression beyond North America and Western Europe. A rich ethnography of trans life in Turkey, the text depicts everyday scenes of violent intimacies across several interpersonal and institutional settings: the street, police, medicine, law, and family.

The first two chapters investigate questions of space, revealing the *longue durée* of spatial violence against trans women. In chapter one, Zengin meticulously traces histories of forced mobility within and beyond the urban centers of Istanbul. In the early 1980s, police apprehended trans people en masse and deported them from the capital to the middle of the country. In recent years, displacement has taken new but, as Zengin emphasizes, no less violent forms. Gentrification, urban renewal, and the influx of neoliberal capital collectively endanger trans women's access to "the street as a public good" (202). Even when spatially marginalized, however, they develop intimate strategies of place making and community gathering; they maintain "safe zones" such as the organization Istanbul LGBTT, which provide a degree of stability amid conditions of precarity (65). As Zengin illustrates, trans women labor tirelessly to transform the violence of displacement into the intimacy of emplacement.

Continuing this line of inquiry into spatial violence, chapter two examines the policing of trans bodies. According to one of Zengin's informants, Turkish law

enforcement penalizes trans women merely for going outside. Their very existence in public space is grounds for criminalization, and they become hypervisible as targets of police surveillance. Paradoxically, Zengin points out, trans women's visibility as objects of the carceral gaze increases in direct proportion to their invisibility "as ordinary subjects in everyday life" (93). To disappear trans presence from public life, the police deploy extralegal techniques of violence: torture, kidnapping, indefinite detention. Drawing from Walter Benjamin, who characterizes the police's function as simultaneously law-preserving and law-making, this chapter presents an incisive critique of police brutality (which, I would note, is itself a redundant phrase). It is no surprise nor contradiction, Zengin reminds us, that the very institution evidently charged with upholding the law would disobey it. Rather, extralegal force represents the foundation—not an anomaly—of the police.

Beaten, stripped, and sexually abused, trans women are exposed to especially obscene technologies of discipline. The "intensely felt proximity" between trans women and police officers, Zengin suggests, is an expression of violent intimacy; indeed, violence is experienced intimately—in, on, and throughout the body (78). Likewise, trans women's tactics of resistance center the body, harnessing its capacity for disruption. Zengin narrates the striking story of Zeren, a trans woman who, while held in custody, cut off her own penis and threw it at a police chief notorious for terrorizing trans women. With this radical gesture, which we might interpret as a gender-affirming act, Zeren stages her body as the site of defiant protest against police violence.

The following two chapters delve deeper into issues of embodiment, turning to the violent intimacies of the gender confirmation process in the entangled domains of law and medicine. Chapter three rehearses the psychiatric history of transsexuality and the institutional management of this category in Turkey. In order to change the marker on their state identification cards, trans people are subjected to invasive procedures that claim to collect evidence of their "true,"

authentic gender. Legal recognition can be bestowed only after psychiatrists have evaluated and assessed the most intimate details of a person's life to determine if they can satisfactorily perform gender norms—which is to say, if they can pass. Zengin argues that by carefully, almost obsessively supervising and observing trans bodies, the state exercises what Foucault calls its productive power. That is, it produces "desirable" subjects who must adhere to a singular trajectory of transition, which necessarily culminates in a cisnormative "ideal." Medicolegal scrutiny leaves no room for differences and multiplicities, repeatedly enacting "institutionalized violence" and "infiltrating intimate accounts . . . of trans embodiment" (129).

Chapter four furthers this critique of medicolegal regulation in Turkey, focusing on dimensions of touch, feeling, and the sensorium. To legally transition after gender confirmation surgery, trans women must be inspected by medical authorities who decide if their vaginas are "deep enough" (130). The state's definition of the female body, then, is entirely contingent upon its availability for vaginal penetration. The "heteropenetrative state"—Zengin's evocative term—exerts its authority and enforces heteronormativity by violently touching the most intimate zones of trans feminine bodies (137). Paying close attention to the body and the senses, Zengin's materialist approach is a welcome departure from the tendency towards abstraction in contemporary trans thought.

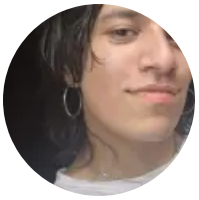
The final two chapters confront the ongoing devastation of trans femicides. Turkish activists frame these tragic murders as hate crimes and human rights abuses; insisting that anti-trans violence is structural rather than sporadic, they implicate the state and the criminal legal system within so-called "individual" acts. In particular, advocates demand an end to the legal defense of "unjust provocation"—akin to the "trans panic defense"—used by assailants who claim that they were driven to violence by the discovery of a trans partner's "actual" sex (152). Zengin situates activist efforts within a broader context, where legal paradigms of recognition and protection circulate transnationally among

queer/trans movements. Without dismissing the importance of these struggles, she also foregrounds the limits of the law as a means of attaining justice. Hate crime legislation extends the reach of state control, requires and reproduces fictions of the perfect victim, and perhaps most crucially, can address violence only *after* it has already occurred. If the law cannot be relied upon to deliver justice, how else might we envision the potential for repair?

Reflecting on this question, the sixth chapter turns to funerals as intimate sites of trans kinship. Since trans people in Turkey are so often abandoned by their families, their friends take on the responsibility of organizing their funeral ceremonies. These practices of care "contest the primacy given to blood families" and experiment with alternative ways of belonging and relating to others (171). Trans women reappropriate conventional concepts of home and motherhood for their own purposes—for cultivating their own modes of kinship. They imagine home not within the domestic realm, but rather in social, political, and community organizing spaces, where older trans women serve as maternal figures. These intergenerational friendships and affinities provide the conditions of possibility for trans survival and vitality.

Violent Intimacies documents Turkish trans women's creative methods of reckoning with the regimes of violence that they suffer on a daily basis. Zengin offers us a glimpse of the manifold bonds of sociality and networks of solidarity that sustain trans life in a world fragmented by state neglect and exclusion—the intimacies that emerge from violence and endure despite it.

Author Information



Avik Sarkar

Avik Sarkar investigates the aesthetics, erotics, and politics of transsexual life. She is especially interested in trans legal theory, trans feminist thought, and trans of color critique. Avik has presented her work at Lancaster University, the Hunter Museum of American Art, the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA, and the Connecticut Ethnic Studies Symposium. She graduated from Yale magna cum laude with distinction in women's, gender, and sexuality studies and a certificate of advanced language study in French. Her thesis was supported by the Bruce L. Cohen LGBT Studies Research Award. Avik is currently at work on an archival project published in spring 2025—supported by a research fellowship from the nonprofit arts organization Visual AIDS—about the late San Francisco-based artist Miss Kitty Litter. This year she is pursuing a master's at Oxford, fully funded by the Clarendon Scholarship, and in fall 2025 she will begin legal studies at Harvard.

View all of Avik Sarkar's articles.

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Review of *Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada* by Karrmen Crey (University of Minnesota Press)

by Meghan Hipple | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT Karrmen Crey's *Producing Sovereignty* explores the rise of Indigenous media in Canada since the 1990s, focusing on the intersection of cultural production, institutional influence, and Indigenous sovereignty. Using documentary and non-fiction films as case studies, Crey examines how Indigenous creators navigate and challenge colonial structures, using media as a tool for asserting identity and autonomy.

KEYWORDS Indigenous peoples, art, documentary, institutions, new media, sovereignty

Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada. By Karrmen Crey. University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 224 pp. (paperback). ISBN 9781517914509. US List $27.

In *Producing Sovereignty: The Rise of Indigenous Media in Canada*, Karrmen Crey (Sto:lo and a member of the Cheam Band) explores the surge of media created by Indigenous people across Canada over the last three decades. She examines the social, political, and technological factors that have contributed to this rise, placing her argument within the broader historical and political landscape of Canada at the time. Beginning with an explanation of the 1982 patriation of the Canadian Constitution and the inclusion of Section 35, which acknowledged

Indigenous rights, Crey reminds us that despite this legal enshrinement of rights, the broader struggle for true Indigenous self-determination continues.

The 1990s marked a significant period of support for Indigenous cultural production, helping to lay the groundwork for what Crey describes as cultural and visual sovereignty. Drawing on minoritarian media studies, she references scholars like Chon A. Noriega and Jun Okada, who have examined the politics of identity-based cinemas. Crey uses institutional analysis to challenge discourses of exclusion and misrepresentation. The discursive approaches that Crey challenges often reduce analysis of Indigenous-produced media to the margins of mainstream media. Instead, she argues for a framework that focuses on the institutional context of creation, offering insights into the negotiations between Indigenous media practitioners and the sites of production that have shaped their work. While others have explored the role of institutions in the development of Indigenous media, Crey broadens that discussion to include sites like the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, provincial broadcasters, independent television production companies, and postsecondary programs. Each chapter of her book serves as a case study, examining the institutions and non-fiction media forms that have played a role in the production of Indigenous visual sovereignty from across Canada and, in one instance, within the US university system.

In chapter one, Crey focuses on Doug Cuthand (Cree, Little Pine First Nation), a prominent filmmaker whose expansive career has received little attention. Through this exploration of Cuthand's work from journalist to documentarian, Crey explains how Indigenous media producers create work that is simultaneously institutionally funded and critical of the Canadian nation-state. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, she reveals how state authority can seek to manage social and ideological disruptions through the performance of accommodation. Yet Crey argues that the influence of national cultural policy on Indigenous media production is not monolithic, taking on different meanings

depending on their interpretation and implementation within various institutional contexts.

In chapter two, Crey explores the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance and the group's collaboration with the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Indigenous creators involved in this collaboration produced a series of public service announcements about self-government that Crey interprets as acts of resistance that carved out an Indigenous public sphere distinct from the dominant, colonial one.

Chapter three continues this exploration by looking at television networks and reality TV as sites where Indigenous sovereignty is negotiated. Crey's analysis of the funding mechanisms behind Indigenous media production, particularly the Canada Media Fund reveals the complexities of media production in Canada. Her detailed tracing of elusive funding streams, bureaucratic hierarchies, and organizational strategies is one of many standout aspects of her research, offering a valuable resource for anyone interested in the intersections of media production, policy, and implementation. Using textual analysis, Crey examines how the reality show *Indians + Aliens* communicates Indigenous cosmologies to a broad national audience, revealing the relationship between independent Indigenous productions and industry trends in broadcast TV.

Chapter four, "Indigenous Documentaries and Academic Research Institutions," compares two documentary films: *Navajo Talking Pictures* (1984) created by Arlene Bowman (Diné) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and *Crying Rock* (2010) by Banchi Hanuse (Nuxalk) at the University of British Columbia. Through institutional analysis, Crey argues that examining the context of production for both films raises important questions about how postsecondary training informs material and thematic representation. Ultimately, she seeks to understand how filmmakers develop their craft through the interplay of theory and practice in institutionalized academic settings. This chapter offers a concise

methodology for engaging with the role of academic theory and practice in contemporary media ecologies. Instead of viewing academia solely as an interpreter or critic, Crey examines its elliptical nature as both a starting and ending point in media production.

The final chapter addresses digital media, specifically virtual reality, and how Indigenous creators use technology to challenge colonial narratives and assert sovereignty. Crey discusses the 360-degree immersive documentary *Highway of Tears* (2016), which addresses the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). In this chapter, Crey critiques not only the Canadian government's inadequate response to the MMIWG crisis but also the discourse around virtual reality that frames it as an "empathy machine." Crey argues that because of the history and practices of ethnographic filmmaking, which claimed unfettered access to Indigenous experiences for non-Indigenous audiences, the immersive nature of *Highway of Tears* cannot produce empathy only discomfort. The nearness of audience members to Indigenous trauma turns the position of the viewer from passive spectator into active witness. *Producing Sovereignty* offers critical insights into the ongoing struggles and triumphs of Indigenous cultural production. However, as Crey makes clear, her book is not meant to be representative of all Indigenous media created in Canada and beyond. This book represents only a small fraction of media, specifically, documentary media—and there are many more Indigenous-made documentaries and institutions worth examining. Crey's work emphasizes the agency of Indigenous media practitioners. Despite institutional constraints, Indigenous artists have used media to assert their sovereignty, challenge colonial narratives, and create spaces for Indigenous perspectives. This agency is evident in the diverse and vibrant body of Indigenous media that has emerged in Canada over the past three decades. Through meticulous research and thoughtful analysis, Crey bolsters our understanding of Indigenous sovereignty and the power of media as a tool for cultural and political expression.

Producing Sovereignty offers critical insights into the ongoing struggles and triumphs of Indigenous cultural production. However, as Crey makes clear, her book is not meant to be representative of all Indigenous media created in Canada and beyond. This book represents only a small fraction of media, specifically, documentary media—and there are many more Indigenous-made documentaries and institutions worth examining. Crey's work emphasizes the agency of Indigenous media practitioners. Despite institutional constraints, Indigenous artists have used media to assert their sovereignty, challenge colonial narratives, and create spaces for Indigenous perspectives. This agency is evident in the diverse and vibrant body of Indigenous media that has emerged in Canada over the past three decades. Through meticulous research and thoughtful analysis, Crey bolsters our understanding of Indigenous sovereignty and the power of media as a tool for cultural and political expression.

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Review of *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* by Arseli Dokumacı (Duke University Press)

by Emalee Crews | Book Reviews, Issue 14.1 (Spring 2025)

ABSTRACT *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* by Arseli Dokumacı builds upon theories of affordances through the concept of "activist affordances," which describes the "performative microacts/-arts through which disabled people enact and bring into being the worlds that are not already available to them, the worlds they need and wish to dwell in" (5). *Activist Affordances* takes a non-Westernized view of disability that makes room for the complexities of pain, illness, and the nonhuman world. Dokumacı's *Activist Affordances* is a necessary and fresh expansion of disability—beyond the Western conception of the term—that encompasses the disablement of other species in order to resist human exceptionalism, and to better address the destruction colonization, racialization, and capitalism has wrought on the earth and its inhabitants. *Activist Affordances* is a widely applicable piece of scholarly literature that offers strategies for survival in our increasingly precarious world.

KEYWORDS disability, environmental humanities, performance, worldmaking

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Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds by Arseli Dokumacı builds upon theories of affordances through her concept of "activist affordances" that describes the "performative microacts/-arts through

which disabled people enact and bring into being the worlds that are not already available to them, the worlds they need and wish to dwell in" (5). Dokumacı makes clear, however, that activist affordances are not just performed by those living with chronic pain, chronic illness, mental suffering, and other disabilities. Instead, activist affordances are an orientation to an ever-shrinking world for marginalized populations. The concept of "shrinkage" is one that Dokumacı returns to throughout the book that expresses the ways in which the environment—which she refers to as "available affordances"—becomes constricted or constrained by the experience of disablement or pain to the degree that one must invent new affordances in order to survive. Those with impaired bodies and/or minds *have to* create affordances, sometimes just out of their bodies, in order to undertake necessary, life-sustaining actions. Dokumacı's *Activist Affordances* is a necessary and fresh expansion of disability beyond the Western conception of the term to encompass disablement of other species in order to resist human exceptionalism and better address the destruction colonization, racialization, and capitalism has wrought on the earth and its inhabitants. Through a 12-year ethnographic engagement spanning Istanbul specifically as well as Turkey more broadly, Florida, North Wales, Montreal, Copenhagen, and London, with individuals living with inflammatory types of arthritis who experience chronic pain and other debilitations–and who may or may not identify with the term disabled–Dokumacı produces a visual ethnography that employs disability as method.

Dokumacı splits her book into two parts. Part 1, "Shrinkage," contains four chapters that explore, expand, and crip James Gibson's original theory of affordance and offers the concept of shrinkage to describe the shifts in the available affordances in the environment as a result of changes in the body or mind. Within this section, Dokumacı attends to her borrowing of the theory of affordances from Gibson with extreme care and respect, in line with Sara Ahmed's proposed consideration for "the act of following." Dokumacı includes different situations experienced by individuals with varying levels of impairment to foreground the frictions between the theory of affordance and the partial,

incomplete, or long-lasting painful affordances experienced by impaired and/or disabled people. She notes two areas of friction with the traditional theory of affordances: first, to account for partial affordances; and, second, the shifting, appearing, and disappearing of potential affordances as bodies and illnesses change over time.

Part 2, "Performance," comprises the rest of the six chapters and further refines and elaborates on the theory of activist affordances through a visual ethnography of the tiny acts disabled people commit to imagine the world otherwise: DIY adaptive insoles, people as affordances, button-up shirts as pullovers, pliers as jar openers, and teeth as tools, to name a few.

Dokumacı makes major theoretical contributions to disability studies through her introduction of terms that expand how we might discuss the complexities of disability. The "habitus of ableism," for example, challenges the traditional models of disability and focuses on "how a collective system of beliefs, habits, and dispositions that are deeply ingrained in our ways of acting, perceiving, and behaving can automatically make the affordances of the world more available to some bodies/minds than to others" (20). Shrinkage, as explained above, occurs because of the habitus of ableism that enforces ways of perceiving affordances that make it difficult to imagine affordances otherwise, a necessary skill for those experiencing disablement and impairment. Activist affordances, thus, arise out of shrinkage; an accessible form of worldmaking that does not require materials or capital to come into being but is instead created out of bodies and imaginations. These tiny micro acts are ephemeral and fleeting. However, Dokumacı argues that these performances remain and form a "disability repertoire" made up of bodily memory and the imprint on the environment. This repertoire enables the transferability to others experiencing constraints on their environment and thus their available affordances.

Activist Affordances takes a non-westernized view of disability that makes room for the complexities of pain, illness, and the nonhuman world. Activist affordances perform a dance of labor that imagines the world otherwise, especially in areas of the world without financial and infrastructural access to adaptive tools and technologies. Given the book's perspective, I was surprised by Dokumacı's limited use of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, as it is only briefly mentioned in the introduction and final chapter of the book. Dokumacı's proposal "that we consider activist affordances as the outposts of actually existing accessible futures" (247) is a lovely one, but one that would be strengthened through more engagement with Muñoz throughout the text, building in a dynamic structure to the theory.

I am excited for the generative engagements Dokumacı's work is sure to open up, including the further articulation of how the theory of activist affordances can be applied to a diseased and dying planet. Dokumacı successfully expands Gibson's theory of affordances in an innovative and groundbreaking way. The theory of activist affordances will hopefully be cited in future scholarship that is engaged with critical disability studies, performance studies, and/or the environmental humanities. The second part of the book, "Performance" is an especially useful tool for disabled, chronically ill, chronically pained, and mentally ill folks to see the beauty of their tiny, everyday activist affordances, and for potentially generating new affordances not yet imagined. *Activist Affordances* is a widely applicable piece of scholarly literature that offers strategies for survival in our increasingly precarious world.

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Emalee Crews is a Cultural Studies PhD student at UC Davis. They are a queer disabled activist and student who explores the intersection of food sovereignty, food justice, critical disability studies, and crip futurity. Their work aims to build a nuanced understanding of queer/crip theory, food justice movements, and the cultural, psychological, and emotional connections communities form with food in order to construct sustainable food justice platforms for disabled people. They integrate decoloniality, anti-capitalism, theories of care, anarcho-mutual aid traditions, and spiritual wellness to understand the systems of oppression that limit access to food justice systems and traditional, cultural, natural, and/or unprocessed foods for disabled bodyminds.

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